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## **The Aesthetics of Labour**

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## *Introduction*

Not a few deities have been overthrown by the proletariat, not a few sacred things have been violated by it. But only one god has remained intact, in only one temple the proletariat dares not enter. This god is beauty, this temple is art.

Osip Brik

The shiny images of lustrous, technologically advanced megalopolises, populated by skyscrapers whose peaks disappear into the clouds, projecting their intense lights into the night, have become the most common trait of the Chinese city in the third millennium. Not all Chinese cities are as developed as the most advanced ones, such as Beijing, Shanghai or Shenzhen, global cities in their own right that have benefitted from a sort of “priority lane” conferred by state policies. However, it is such advanced cities that populate today’s cultural imagination on China (also with respect to the existing gap with rural areas). Long past is the time when China was seen almost exclusively through the lens of colonialism and orientalism as an exotic and remote land, fascinating and mysterious at the same time, which enchanted with its poetry and traditions, although this enchantment accompanied an equally strong belief that the country should be “domesticated” and “modernised” to serve the purposes of the European and US capital. Perhaps even farther away—although closer to us from a strictly chronological point of view—is the time when China was “closer,” stirring the emotions of the youth in the imaginary totality of the “West.” There is a certain paradox to it, because now China’s development model and integration in global markets make it concretely much closer to the “West” than the period known as the Global Sixties. Nowadays, China is halfway between a persistent role as the “workshop of the world” and its new

skin of producer and provider of highly advanced technology. It is running towards its own “modernity,” in the form of a “rejuvenation” with a strong ethno-cultural character, and it is producing its own peculiar form of “globalisation” while upholding the most contradictory political and socio-economic system of the world, i.e. “market socialism.” For roughly four decades, then, new motivations of curiosity towards China have been the search for profit, the lure of tempting market opportunities, and increasingly a perception of geopolitical threat coming from the “Chinese giant” that, in the words attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, has woken and is rising up.

Besides being the symbol of China’s economic development, the city is also its material supporting pillar and main recipient. On the one hand, it has sustained this development in various ways, primarily through heavy industrialisation (with all its human and environmental toll) and an extremely profitable construction industry. On the other hand, the gradual formation of an urban bourgeoisie (generally described as the “middle class,” although there is more to this bourgeoisie than just its intermediate layer) has created a vast market for absorbing the consumer goods produced by the economy. It is precisely the centrality of the city in China’s current development model that makes Bertolt Brecht’s “Questions From a Worker Who Reads” even more compelling: “Who built Thebes of the seven gates? / In the books you will find the names of kings. / Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?” Naturally, we should be reminded that China makes an appearance in this immortal poem as well: “Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished / Did the masons go?”<sup>1</sup> These masons are to be found in the lower strata of China’s present-day society, constituting the vast mobile sector within an already gargantuan working class. They are rural–urban migrant workers. Variouslly depicted as “floating” (*liudong* 流动), “drifting” (*piaobo* 漂泊), “scattered sand” (*sansha* 散沙), more than 250 million individuals have left their rural homes to move to cities, where they have become a cheap and easily disposable labour-force for high-intensity labour regimes in factories, construction sites, domestic care work, services, and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> Brecht, *Poetry and Prose*, 63.



Just like the builders of Thebes and the Wall they are the builders of marvels and creators of prosperity, but then they seem to disappear from history, and from the present as well, once their job is done. Furthermore, their artistic and visual representation is often filtered by an official narrative that tends to construct a distant, exotic and sexualised portrayal of them.<sup>2</sup> However, they constitute a crucial part of China's contemporaneity, but also of the world today, given their position in the global supply chain and the transnational imbrications of capitalism today.

Migrant workers, as individual subjects and well-determined social community, are the “builders” of the “Chinese miracle,” to maintain the Brechtian image. At the same time, they are its darker side. Huge masses of labour-force on which the glories of industry, development, local and foreign capital have been built, their right to the city is constantly questioned on all levels by their extreme social and human precarity, as well as by the total absence of political representation. Their full access to the city is strongly limited by bureaucratic systems of admission and exclusion, and the social engineering project that has accompanied the economic reforms in China since the late 1970s have been oriented at driving migrants out of the cities once their job has been performed. A writer who has most powerfully captured the urban condition of migrant workers in China today is Hao Jingfang 郝景芳. In her “Beijing zhedie” 北京折叠 (Beijing Folding), she imagines a technologically superior future where the city of Beijing deals with overpopulation by splitting into three levels. The city folds and expands according to the time of the day and the night, twenty four hours entirely at the disposal of the bourgeoisie, and the next day split between the middle zone and the periphery, where the lower strata live. This effective metaphor fully conveys the reality of inequality and disparity that characterises cities today. At the same time, it also shows the power of literature to conduct an intense questioning on the present—and the future—with a strong critical spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> Two relevant studies analysing how migrant workers (especially female migrants) are depicted in state-sponsored media are Jaguścik, “Cultural Representation and Self-Representation,” and Sun Wanning, “Indoctrination, Fetishization, and Compassion.”

## *Research questions and field positioning*

Migrant workers do not simply move, toil, and waste their existence away in the limited options left by the prevailing system. They strive for a better life, and struggle to improve their living conditions. Furthermore, they produce culture and art. They mostly write poetry, but also prose, in the form of fiction and nonfiction alike. As it often happens with subaltern, marginalised, obscured or oppressed groups, we might be inclined to think that they typically write about their own experience—in other words, that they produce a highly referential account of their life (and, of course, plight, as if their lives were all just suffering and victimhood). In a way, that assumption is not entirely misled. The degree of mimesis and referentiality is undoubtedly high in migrant workers' cultural production, which is probably also one of the main reasons that motivates readers' interest in their work (especially when the audience is not from their same class). However, mimesis and referentiality often stand opposite to other poles, such as lyrics and abstraction. Does the heavy presence of the *world* jeopardise a greater refinement of the *word*? Does the *factual* necessarily come at the expense of the *expressive*?<sup>3</sup> Are we thinking along these lines as we approach what migrant workers write, the culture they produce? Because there might be more to it for us to handle and ponder on.

These questions are precisely the main considerations that motivate the inquiry conducted in this thesis. My main questions are: *How do migrant workers employ contemporary forms of artistic expression? What kind of strategies (literary or not) do they put into action to claim their literary dignity? How do they read the city through their experience?* These two questions alone regard two crucial issues when it comes to migrant workers' literature. The second question implies examining not only *what* migrant workers are writing and saying, but also *how* they are doing it; in other words,

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<sup>3</sup> The terms in this reflection are inspired by van Crevel, "Misfit," 89.

how they strive to improve what they write also from a formal point of view (and what they consider as valid models in order to do so), and to make it more than just an account of their life, but also able to convey their emotions, building also more profound (if not more abstract) representations of themselves and their surrounding context. It connects closely to the third question, namely what kind of representation of reality comes out of this effort. But even more importantly, and that is the core of the first question, it is decisive to analyse how migrant workers *handle* and *approach* literature, what uses it serves in their hands, what shape it assumes, as a vehicle for self-expression *and* the expression of the self. The necessary prerequisite would be to de-fetishise literature by understanding it, to use Terry Eagleton's formulation, as "*functional* rather than *ontological*," telling us "about the role of a text [...] in a social context, its relations with and differences from its surroundings, the ways it behaves, the purposes it may be put to and the human practices clustered around it."<sup>4</sup>

Of course, these questions already contain many more issues. Indeed, migrant workers' literature lends itself to a myriad of different interests, methods and interpretations. The last ten years have seen an increasing interest in migrant workers' literature (primarily poetry), and a substantial deal of scholarship has been produced in English-speaking academia on the subject. Most of this scholarship will be referenced to throughout the thesis, and it is therefore unnecessary to present it here. For now, suffice it to say that the existing scholarship has already touched upon a considerable amount of research angles offered by migrant workers' literature. One of the most relevant aspects is undoubtedly the way migrant workers' literature is positioned in China's literary context, both in terms of history and present relations: Inwood sees it within the context of the long-standing contrast between introspective and socially-responsible approaches that has been running through Chinese literature since forever. Similarly, van Crevel has explored what happens when such a culturally-loaded instrument as poetry falls in the hands of a specific social subject like the

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<sup>4</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 8.

migrant worker, and rather investigating what poetry becomes for migrant workers and what uses migrant workers do of poetry. In terms of connections with the literary history, Jaguścik has focused on the relationship with women's poetry, and Pozzana with the intellectual questions already raised by the avant-garde Obscure poets of the 1980s, particularly the creation of an independent space of artistic creativity. Others have concentrated their attention more on the "sociological" side of the matter (meaning what it says about society—van Crevel's inquiry is outright sociology of culture, too). Sun Wanning has examined the "self-ethnographic" function performed by literature for migrant workers (and how it is received by critics), an approach similar to Zhou Xiaojing's discussion of the poetry as a way to make sense of the poet's social surroundings (in the first English-language scholarship published on the subject so far). Not incidentally then, Amy Dooling even characterises migrant workers' narratives as a form of self-expression *vis-à-vis* unfaithful mainstream representations. Among individual case studies, Gong Haomin has examined the eco-critical implications of workers' poetry, as well as the relationship between the representation of class and gender, while Li Yun and Rong Rong have concentrated on the identity issues stemming from it, and Hongwei Bao has discussed how different subalternities, namely social and gender, interact.<sup>5</sup>

The thesis will try to bridge these important and variegated contributions by integrating them in the analysis of the context as well as texts. One of the main contributions and additions that this thesis can provide to this already vast (and rapidly growing) field of inquiry concerns precisely how today's migrant workers, i.e. individuals who belong to a specific social class with in a fundamental position within productions relations in society, and whose art inevitably bears the stamp of this class belonging (why and how will be discussed in chapter One), relate to the rich history of working-class cultural expressions that materialised in China during the 20th century. Workers'

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<sup>5</sup> Hongwei Bao, "Queering the Global South." Dooling, "Self-Representation." Haomin Gong, "Towards a New Leftist Ecocriticism," "Gender, Class, and Capital." Jaguścik, "The Woman Attempting to Disrupt the Ritual." Li Yun and Rong Rong, "Identity, Self-Identity and Beauty." Inwood, "Between License and Responsibility." Pozzana, "Poetry." Sun Wanning, "Poetry of Labour." Van Crevel, "The Cultural Translation," "No One in Control?". Zhou Xiaojing, *Migrant Ecologies*.

poetry is not only *poetry*, but also *workers'*, and workers' cultural production has a long history and tradition behind it that crosses China and the world, the 20th and the 21st century (as well as the 19th, to some degree). Is this historical tradition still valid today? And if not, what replaces it? Or more precisely, in order to avoid simplifications based on either-or dyads, how does this tradition intersect with other sources of inspiration, possibly more contemporary, and more "pop," or also coming from China's cultural and literary history? How do these authors draw on different sources that they consider valid to carry out something that was also a central goal of most workers' literature in the 20th century (as well as today, in other latitudes as well), namely the faithful and consistent representation of the reality of labour done precisely by those who are directly engaged with it? Does contemporary workers' literature emerge as a coherent body, and do its producers conceive of it as a shared effort, hinting then at embryos of class consciousness?

As a consequence, this thesis does not approach (migrant) workers' literature only as a specific literary genre, taking its place among other genres of modern and contemporary literature, and in literary history as a whole. Workers' literature bear great implications, not only but especially in China. In a world where the working class is declared defunct after having changed the course of history in incontrovertible ways; in a time when manual labour is considered to be on a clock; and in a country constitutionally ruled by a party whose statutes claim it to be the vanguard of the proletariat, this study purports to grasp the organic and dialectical relation between the two constituents of the phenomenon, i.e. workers *and* literature. It therefore necessarily crosses different fields, primarily Chinese literature studies (and urban literature in particular), but also global working-class literature studies, the sociology of cultural production, Marxist theory and the critique of aesthetics. This approach is hopefully also a demonstration of how the resources of area studies can also be useful to understand realities that go beyond the "area" proper.

Contemporary Chinese workers' literature is a domain of gigantic proportions. In order to address these questions in a condensed way, the thesis will take the Picun Literature Group as its

overarching case study, and then conduct case studies on its individual members. A creative writing workshop formed by migrant workers in the eastern outskirts of Beijing, the Picun Literature Group provides the perfect opportunity to discuss literature both as a writing practice and a social practice, especially oriented at community making.

### *Textual analysis and methodology*

No particular phenomenon of literature is purely literary, nor does it raise only purely literary questions. It should always be contextualised in its social formation, historical circumstances, and specific field of production. However, it is truly remarkable and compelling to acknowledge the multitude and magnitude of questions at stake when approaching working-class literature. It is exactly for this reason that setting clear delimitations of what this thesis means for *workers' literature* is paramount. It is important to stress that, for the purposes of this thesis, migrant workers' literature will be understood as the major (but not exclusive) constituent of post-1980s workers' literature in China, and that is why the two terms will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis (although not when referring to worker's literature before the 1980s).

In fact, the designation of what can be considered as literature produced by members of the working class conjures up a number of thorny problems. It clearly clashes with the commonly-held assumption that the working class no longer exists, either because labour has ceased to be central in the post-Fordist, "late capitalist" mode of production (which is strongly disputable), or because workers have generally lost class consciousness, i.e. their subjective sense of being a class. Paradoxically, in some contexts, *working-class literature* even appears in history books and established canons only as a politically neutralised form of writing.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore necessary to specify what we mean by it, and in order to do so, it is extremely helpful to employ some

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the Swedish case in Nilsson and Lennon, "Defining Working-Class Literature(s)."

coordinates that tend to resurface any time we try to answer the question of what can be considered working-class writing. There are at least four criteria that can be used to draw its boundaries, which I borrow from Barbara Foley's schematisation in *Radical Representations*, although others, most notably John Lennon and Magnus Nilsson, and Maghiel van Crevel for the Chinese case, move along very similar lines.<sup>7</sup>

### 1) *Authorship.*

The author is a worker themselves, and therefore what they produce can be considered workers' literature. The obvious advantage of this approach lies in emphasising authenticity, because a worker writing on their own theoretically dispels risks of ventriloquism and upper-class appropriation (although it does not automatically exclude other forms of mediation by agents other than the author). There is also a "practical" side in that it exposes the unequal distribution of the right to cultural fruition and production (particularly by assessing whether worker authors can publish or not and for what reasons). However, there can be worker writers with no interest in penning anything about matters relating to the working class. In other words, the literary product of a worker writer will indeed be a form of literature produced by workers, but merely in a descriptive sense.

### 2) *Readership.*

If we count as working-class literature what is deliberately produced with the purpose of being read by workers themselves, arguably to increase their class consciousness, the positive side lies in consequentiality, because it would indicate a literature with a strong operative function. However, this approach, if taken rigorously, would entail the risk of disqualifying good working-class literature because, due to historical reasons, it has failed to reach a wide working-class reading

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<sup>7</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, Ch. 3; Nilsson and Lennon, "Defining Working-Class Literature(s)": van Crevel, "The Cultural Translation."

public or crossed its (class-based) time and space to reach other audiences as well. And if readership was the only criterion, authenticity would be sacrificed for consequentiality.

### 3) *Subject matter.*

Referring to working-class themes, environments and characters would be a characteristic both necessary (thus prescriptive) and sufficient to qualify workers' literature, thus including also works by individuals coming from other social backgrounds. Fidelity to the working class' actual reality and its processes would offer an irreplaceable and invaluable perspective, but it may possibly impose realism as its dominant style, excluding other domains (including less mimetic psychological explorations), and even hand down a ready-made version of class consciousness not necessarily in line with reality.

### 4) *Perspective.*

Workers' literature would include those works that adopt the perspective, or point of view, of the working class, irrespective of the identity of their authors, the public they manage to reach, and the subject matter they employ. This approach would make class standpoint tantamount to political standpoint, not a matter of social origin or collocation, and it would therefore be less empirical, more able to capture the inner complexity of any work of literature, as well as the multidirectional relationship between author and content. Historically, a focus on perspective prevailed in Communist-inspired proletarian literatures produced worldwide during the first half of the 20th century. However, this approach does not rescue workers' literature from the risk of producing works that idealise or romanticise the working class, for there would be no easy answer to the basic question of who decides what the correct class standpoint is.

These positions can be summarily encapsulated in the triad of *by* (authorship), *for* (readership), and *about* (subject-matter). Of course, *for* can refer not only to readership per se, but also to the perspective, i.e. describe a literature that is not necessarily only for workers to read, but also produced to foster their politico-historical consciousness. As the thesis will show, literature



produced by workers or aimed at them has crossed these dimensions, integrating them or privileging one over another. Their values have changed over time. During the 20th century, in the language of the Third International, privileging the *by* or *for* was exposed to labels of “spontaneism” or workerism, while focusing on *about* (or perspective) often fell in the categories of didacticism and paternalism. My approach here can only be contingent and operative, not definitive. I am not suggesting any preferred circumscription of the genre; I am merely stressing that, for the purposes of this dissertation, I am interested in considering above all authors (and occasionally subject matter), i.e. working-class authors who write (preferably on working-class themes), because this approach can offer more insights into the formative process of workers’ writing and worker authors today. As a consequence, I will use *workers’ literature* as a working (pardon the pun) definition to describe the body of literary works produced by individuals engaged in wage labour. With respect to *working-class literature*, *workers’ literature* is more befitting for the purposes of this dissertation because it emphasises description (workers who write, in any context they may find themselves in) over prescription (a literature delimited by pre-set criteria that are often not unanimous). Two practical reasons motivate this choice. First, it is helpful to go back to the most basic features of this form of writing, namely working individuals engaging with literary creation, as a “historically and materially situated phenomenon, which takes on various shapes and is constructed in myriad ways at different historical moments and places.”<sup>8</sup> Speaking of *workers’ literature* is more flexible and practical than *working-class literature*, potentially more rigid, if not even canonised, losing touch with the way things actually are on the ground. Second, it acknowledges the fact that critics and scholars in China have always referred to *gongren wenxue* 工人文学, workers’ literature, generally without including the word *jieji* 阶级, class. In sum, adopting a descriptive approach allows us to consider source material potentially every literary product penned by workers, regardless of whether they are included in canonically- or academically-elaborated categories of “workers’

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<sup>8</sup> Nilsson and Lennon, “Defining Working-Class Literature(s),” 40.

literature.” It also helps dealing with the question whether an author’s social being automatically corresponds to their consciousness (i.e., whether being a worker is a sufficient condition for an author to write of working-class themes with a class consciousness), to what extent it determines their literary output, and to what degree it does not.

This thesis is interested in investigating what migrant workers write, and how they write it, constantly pondering on the complex relationship of their literary production with authors’ own life experience, particularly the way the latter influences the former, and the former aestheticises the latter. Is the experience of displacement, labour exploitation, wage slavery, urban discrimination inevitably reflected in workers’ literary production? And if so, how? The *how* is central because it involves the stylistic and aesthetic choices by worker authors themselves, and the position they take with respect to the field of literary production in China today—and to dominant ideology and cultural mindset as a consequence.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of prose or poetry, it is a field marked by profound divisions along lines of social status, cultural identity, aesthetic commitments. Ruptures, splits and controversies erupt all the time, making the field an extremely vital and productive place, but also drawing the boundaries of “camps” or “types” that authors are ascribed to. In a seminal essay from 2010, “Zuojia shenfen jiegou yu xin shiqi wenxue” 作家身份结构与新时期文学 (Writers’ Identity Structure and New Period Literature), Fang Wei 房伟 provides an assessment of the current situation for what concerns the status of writer in China, concentrating on what is known, in the literary world, as the “new period” (*xin shiqi* 新时期), i.e. literature after the Mao Zedong 毛泽东 era (roughly from 1977–1978). Taking into account how the public status, the commercial persona and the subjectivity of authors is formed at the intersection of social conditions, political prescriptions and aesthetic positionings, Fang Wei singles out three main types: “core writers” (核

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<sup>9</sup> Ideology as in fake consciousness, the “ideal expression of dominant material relations” (Marx, *German Ideology*, 67) separated from its concrete reality, and therefore taking the form of apparently autonomous ideas with no direct relation to the socio-cultural formation that breeds or influences them.

心作家), holders of high political and economic capital by virtue of their adherence to the prevailing ideological mood and political requirements for literature (i.e. “national themes”), as well as their membership in the China Writers’ Association (which also pays their salaries). Then there are “second-grade core writers” (次级核心作家), who privilege the acquisition of economic capital by producing a highly marketable literature at the expense of a greater attention to aesthetics and politico-ideological mandates.<sup>10</sup> Finally, “outsider writers” (外围作家) have little political and economic capital, but high aesthetic principles, standing in opposition to the commodification of literature, but also oppose the prevailing or mainstream ideology with their social critique.<sup>11</sup>

Fang Wei seems to be readapting Pierre Bourdieu’s characterisation of the literary field as a dynamic and interactive set of agents (authors, but also publishers, mediators, etc.), internally divided between the sub-fields of large-scale production, directed at market consumption (i.e. for non-producers) and restricted production, namely for peers (other producers).<sup>12</sup> These two poles are superimposed by other two poles that concern the status of the writer. The heteronormous pole is outbound, it looks at a vast market of consumers instead of the inner circle of producers, and therefore it privileges financial success (economic capital). By contrast, the autonomous pole is based on peer-to-peer recognition, i.e. on a closer dynamics between producers who acknowledge each other as writers based on their aesthetic achievements, rather than volume of sales. As a result, the two poles present very different criteria to assess literary legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> Of course, we should be wary to universalise Bourdieu’s model and uncritically superimpose it to the Chinese literary field, which also presents significant peculiarities (the political element for example, properly evoked by Fang Wei, takes the form of an active intervention of the state in cultural matters). Like Fumian suggests, Bourdieu’s “observation method (the process)” is valid, but then we need “to verify, a

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<sup>10</sup> Here, ideology in its more common sense as the system of ideas and policy of a political force.

<sup>11</sup> Fang Wei, “Zuojia shenfen,” 11–12.

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 38, 51.

posteriori, what kind of interaction occurs between its polarizing principles.”<sup>14</sup> Anyway, Fang Wei’s pattern is certainly compelling, although it partly suffers from the risks of the sociological tendency to schematise phenomena in binary oppositions, while there are often interactions and hybridisations among the attributes identified by him (he also admittedly sees that writers sometimes move from one position to another, but he sees this movement as a change in time).

In particular, aesthetic choices do not solely depend on authors’ positioning in the field, and require a more specific investigation. Analysing contemporary poetry with a lens that can easily be applied to the world of prose as well, van Crevel characterises one of the fundamental aesthetic and discursive oppositions in the field of cultural production today along the lines of such dichotomies as literary/colloquial, sacred/mundane, elitist/ordinary. In short, the contrast is between a “Elevated” pole, which privileges abstraction from the mundane, the ordinary, the colloquial (and social commitment), and a “Earthly” approach, more interested in social themes and everyday life.<sup>15</sup> Of course, these categories should not be understood as immune and impermeable. Creativity always occurs on the spectrum in between.<sup>16</sup> Nor does an aesthetic choice between the “Elevated” and the “Earthly” automatically result in, or is the result of, a certain identity in the scheme offered by Fang Wei. The two supplement each other in terms of social identity and aesthetic commitments. And they matter for workers’ literature as well, and even more for the author-based approach of this thesis. The absence of one or more institutions with considerable symbolic capital to put forward definitions of workers’ literature has scattered worker authors. Their writing operates on the ground, in the practice itself, not along the lines set by hegemonic frameworks or organisations. How do they position themselves in the field of literary production? How are they influenced by, adapt to, and contribute to its social and aesthetic characteristics?

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<sup>14</sup> Fumian, “The Temple and the Market,” 128–129.

<sup>15</sup> Van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry*, 25–27

<sup>16</sup> Inwood, *Verse Going Viral*, 34.

### *Fieldwork and positionality*

While textual and contextual analysis constitutes the core of this work, fieldwork was a crucial aspect of its preparation. Conducted in Beijing from 28 August 2019 to 25 January 2020, it mainly consisted in participation in the weekly activities of the Picun Literature Group, interviews with its members and other individuals associated with it, as well as experts and scholars. It also brought me to other locations, primarily Dongguan, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Wuhan and Xiamen, to acquire further information about workers' literature at large, present and past. Fieldwork was absolutely essential to collect primary sources, otherwise unavailable, at least at the time when I began working on this thesis (interest in the Picun Literature Group has literally spiked up, and a great deal of more materials is now more easily available also outside of China, last but not least thanks to the *Unofficial Poetry Journals from China* digital collection at the Asian Library of Leiden University); to get to know the authors, interview them, and spend time with them, doing social activities together and acquiring a sense of the performative and public role of their writing; and explore the spaces where they live and operate.

In addition to collecting these sources and experiences, fieldwork was also aimed at facilitating the proximity between myself and the authors who form the object and subjects of this study. There is distance between me and them. It is, first of all, a social distance: they have (had) a direct and everyday experience of the situation that I am only surveying and studying. It is also an intellectual distance: they are practitioners, I am a critic and translator. Being a non-Chinese person was one more attribute that conflated with the former two in configuring me as a member of a foreign academic institution with the status as a visiting scholar at Peking University, one of China's most prestigious. My role as an external person who was there to study the individuals I was spending time with was absolutely transparent (and for some it was problematic, because knowing that what they told me could potentially be published in a non-Chinese context

automatically arouse some caution). There was also a sort of “respectful distance,” this time on the part of my informants, in that I was assimilated the “instructors” or “teachers” (*laoshi* 老师) of the group itself, i.e. not a peer. (I have a particularly fond memory of some members of the group taking pictures of their works annotated by myself and posted them on their WeChat.) Not incidentally, this also had historical roots, considering that the relationship between the intellectual (however committed and sympathetic they may be) and worker authors has always been a complicated and much-debated one, in China just like elsewhere (chapter One discusses this point in greater length).

It took time to surmount some of these “barriers.” It was not possible to do so with each and every one I interviewed, because it naturally happened that I would end up spending more time with some than with others, due to several factors. Nevertheless, even when greater proximity has been acquired, some distances remain, and the scholar should be aware of them to critically approach their experience with their informants and the responses they got. The very translation that occurs in this interaction is one of such persisting distances. Unsurprisingly, this is especially true for interlingual translation, as we know that translating also means presenting an interpretation of the source text based on the translator’s own awareness, interests and commitments (consciously or unconsciously so), in ways brilliantly conveyed by Eleanor Goodman with respect to her own work translating workers’ poetry.<sup>17</sup> But it is true also for cultural translation, i.e. the way we read texts under our survey in our capacity as scholars, extracting them from their socio-cultural context and bringing them into ours, particularly impacting our criteria for selection.<sup>18</sup> Here is where the threat of ventriloquism lurks, i.e. making our informants say what we want to hear, rather what they are actually saying.

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<sup>17</sup> Goodman, “Translating Migrant Worker Poetry,” and “Poetry, Translation, and Labor.”

<sup>18</sup> Van Crevel, “The Cultural Translation.”

With these considerations in mind, my attempt has been focused on taking authors—and their production—in their own terms, trying to understand the meanings and interpretations they gave to their social surroundings and literary activity, comparing them with my own expectations or hypothesis, formulated on the basis of my own previous sources. In textual analysis, I have remained rigorously with texts and their (dis)connections. Further to this, the role of a (foreign) scholar, especially through their discussion with and on authors, can also be to provoke further reflections about themselves and their creations from a different perspective. And interlingual translation, i.e. bringing such writings to an international audience, takes on even more relevance as an ethical obligation for those who consider it one of the tasks of scholarly activity to reach a wider public outside academia. Distance then is not insurmountable, nor a reason for self-reproach on the part of the scholar. Van Crevel has acutely observed that “There’s no Chinese-vs-foreign binary here but a multi-dimensional sliding scale, and probably more imaginative geometries than that.”<sup>19</sup> I shall not hide the fact that my explicit sympathy towards them and their endeavour had a fundamental role in finding a common ground.

In more practical terms, the information collected during fieldwork used in this thesis includes interviews conducted with several members of the literature group, activists who gravitate around it, and external who acts as mediators for it (these roles are discussed in chapter Three). Further information was gathered during my direct participation in the weekly sessions of the group. The large majority of interviews were conducted on an individual basis in the afternoons before the meetings of the group, they were often supplemented by more jovial and informal occasions, such as meals or drinks. While the thesis is rigorous in making use only of the information disclosed during formal interviews, when interviewees were explicitly informed that I would be taking notes or recording in order to incorporate what they would say in my dissertation, other informal events were no less crucial in helping me make sense of life in Picun and the literature group, and have

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<sup>19</sup> Van Crevel, *Walk on the Wild Side*, 58.

inevitably influenced the analysis. Such informal events were mainly chats held over drinks or meals where we had not previously agreed that I would have written down our conversations and used them for this thesis in any way. Other unreported elements include personal observations on other group members, partial disclosures on non-publicised activities, individuals' private information and other statements I was explicitly asked not to divulge.

### *Setup of the thesis*

The thesis is organised along two main parts. In their division, I must confess my debt to van Crevel's triad of context, text and metatext, displayed in his *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money*, a book that has been absolutely fundamental to help this thesis take its final shape. Text is the poetry or prose as it comes in word (or in performance), context can be political, social or cultural (often all of the three), metatext is the discussion on text. Of course, choosing them as overarching definitions of the operations carried out in Part I (context), Part II (text) and the Conclusions (metatext) does not mean that they operate only in their "dedicated" parts. Quite the contrary is true, as the components of this "trinity" actually "*inter-act* more often than not, with boundaries that are positively fuzzy and occasionally deceptive."<sup>20</sup>

As a result, Part I is about context. It deals with general themes regarding the possibility and the practice of workers' literature, its theoretical conditions, and the scholarly discussion around it. In particular, chapter One tackles some basic preconditions to approach workers' literature as *literature*, aesthetic ideology, the dynamics behind the constitution of the "writer" as a recognised figure, and the actors and struggles in the process of the creation of a certain aesthetic sensibility. The chapter then zooms in the Chinese experience of workers' literature from a historical point of view, analysing its incarnations during the first half of the 20th century until the 1970s, starting

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<sup>20</sup> Van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry*, 13.



from the questions of truthfulness and representation of social reality already elaborated during the New Culture Movement of the 1910s. Chapter Two moves closer to the contemporary and outlines the main discussions among practitioners, activists and scholars in China around post-1980s workers' literature, a major part of which is constituted by what can properly be defined migrant workers' literature. Special attention is paid to the issues of the relationship between pre- and post-1980s workers' literatures (are they connected?, are they two entirely separate things?), authorship (is it only workers who write workers' literature?), and the assumed dichotomy existing between social relevance and artistic quality. Finally, chapter Three concentrates on the Picun Literature Group, presenting its history and activities and focusing on the interactions between different agents that make its literary practice possible, and how it is reflected in its publications, i.e. in the way it presents itself to the world.

Part II deals with text(s). The selection of the final corpus does not do any real justice to the richness, complexity and variety of production found among the members and publications affiliated with the literature group. The criteria I have privileged concerned, on the one hand, an assessment of their relevance for the general purposes of this thesis (their connection or disconnections with broader themes of workers' literature, literary genres, social discourses), and, on the other, the relevance accorded to them by the literature group itself, i.e. a certain degree of peer-to-peer "representativeness." Each of the five case studies analysed in Part II is therefore the fruit of a combination of one individual author, presented with her or his characteristics (aesthetic and personal as well), and a different genre. In this way, besides texts, the analysis can concentrate on the use of different forms of literature—memoir, poetry, nonfiction, (auto)fiction—on the part of the authors under scrutiny. Each chapter, for this reason, will contain a certain amount of theory to present the genre in question. Through this survey and critical discussion, the thesis hopes to offer an answer to the numerous questions that have been outlined so far.

## **Part I**

### **Context**

## *Chapter One* *Can the Worker Write?*

The title of the chapter is deliberately provocative, an innuendo to the fundamental question put forward by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 1985 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”<sup>1</sup> Although her argument has witnessed waves of criticisms and defences, the point she makes resonates in our discussion. Her famous conclusion that “The subaltern cannot speak” should not be taken literally, but it is rather a denunciation of the fact that, even when they speak, the subaltern is denied recognition as a speaker. This is also the problem faced by workers’ literature today. Workers do write and create extremely interesting literary enterprises in different parts of the world, particularly in China, also given the proportion of the country’s working class. Compared to the past, when proletarian literatures were generally produced under influence of Communist parties coming from the Third International (before and after the advent of Stalinism), some of which were in power or would rise to it (thus strengthening their normative authority), literary works by members of the working class today tend to come into being in a more spontaneous fashion. As a result, while they can be ascribed to the tradition stemming from the proletarian literatures of the 1920s, they face new problems. One of the major issues is precisely their recognition as “true” *literatures*, and of their authors as “true” *authors*. In other words, they are often (not always) praised for a genuine representation of reality, but rarely considered as producers of literature. This is especially true for the Chinese context, due to a higher degree of attention to workers’ literature in recent decades.

It is therefore necessary to begin this chapter with an analysis of the methodological and categorial contours of workers’ literature, and how working-class authors have been traditionally

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<sup>1</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”.

framed vis-à-vis canon formation and taxonomic definitions. We will be compelled to return to the most basic roots of the art and pose the question of what can be considered literature, or literary, or again literariness, aesthetic in literary theory and not only, in and outside China, especially during the 20th century. This theoretical exploration is helpful to unravel some assumptions revolving around working-class writing, or actually “minor” literatures in general, mostly concerning their degree of mimesis vis-à-vis fictional creation and formal complexion, the relation between experience—which includes class background—and creative writing, and the role played by other actors than the author alone in determining the production, reception, distribution, and, ultimately, appreciation of literature. These general points are further discussed in the next two sections. Firstly, the chapter presents an outline of the discussions on the categories of aesthetics, experience and the “popular” carried out among May Fourth or post-May Fourth writers. Secondly, these discussions are connected with 20th-century experiments at workers’ writing in China, focusing in particular on how they responded (explicitly as well as unconsciously but objectively) to the questions outlined above, and placing them in a global context. It is relevant to point out that such exploration will focus on the theory produced at the time, leaving aside concrete examples of produced works, which have been analysed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> By so doing, the chapter aims at unpacking the concept of the aesthetic, in order to reveal its fundamental nature as ideology, deeply imbricated in dynamics of power (and class) within the field of cultural production, which in turn reflects the same dynamics in the society at large.

In sum, the chapter elucidates various basic issues that concerns workers’ literature in China from a theoretical point of view and in a historical perspective, grounding the investigation of the thesis in a robust scholarly framework drawing on Chinese literary studies and global working-class literatures.

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<sup>2</sup> Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage*, Ch. 3 and (partly) 6; Wang Ban, “Socialist Realism”; Xie Baojie, *Zhuti, xiangxiang yu biaoda*.

## 1.1. Invisible aesthetics, visible challenges

To paraphrase the well-known proposition by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle,”<sup>3</sup> it might be affirmed that the history of all literature produced in class societies is the history of class literature. *Class literature* can mean literature produced by individuals who come from a specific class; to be circulated among a certain class (the same as the author’s, or another); about the vicissitudes of individuals belonging to that specific class; or all of the three. However, the class nature of literature is often evidenced only when it is produced by lower-class authors. The existence of working-class literature is generally admitted, discussed, taken seriously, even canonised in some contexts, while references to bourgeois literature are rare (when not dismissed as overly militant), or historically restricted to the *bourgeois novel* of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe. In a similar fashion, we have women’s, queer, or black literatures, but no men’s, straight, or white literatures. Forms of writing produced outside the dominant chains of production, circulation and discourse are marked in some way. Frequently, it is their authors who actively establish such markers, to emerge from invisibility and make a political stand. Others, however, refuse labels on the premise that they obscure their primary nature as writers, automatically preassigning them to a “genre” based on their identity, actual or assumed (and thereby marginalising them again). The point, however, is that putting labels only on literatures produced by individuals coming from historically oppressed, displaced or silenced groups serves to create a fictional opposition between a trunk of supposedly “pure,” “above-ground,” “classless” or “interclass” literature, with the symbolic authority to set the standards of literary taste, on the one hand, and ramifications of socially-marked forms of writing, on the other.

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<sup>3</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 35.

Admittedly, an approach that, by contrast, wishes to stress the importance of such categorial adjectives risks ending up in the same pitfall that has long engulfed the reception of cultural products by subaltern classes and groups, colonised areas, minorities, and oppressed subjectivities in general, i.e. their automatic pairing with mimesis and allegory. They are held as genuine representatives of their own reality, and what they write is received as an invaluable critique of such a reality (and here by *genuine* I mean the direct experience of what is being written about). Scholarship produced as part of diasporic literature studies has produced useful arguments in this respect. What bridges such different fields of inquiry is the need to approach the cultural producers under scrutiny as literary authors, also beyond a mere documentary role. Dorothy J. Wang's words on Asian-American poetry, for example, resonate with workers' literature as well:

Minority writing, including poetry, is inevitably read as mimetic, auto-biographical, "representative," and ethnographic, with the poet as a native informant (for example, Chinatown tour guide), providing a glimpse into her supposed ethnic culture. [...] Since poetry remains, even in the twenty-first century, the epitome of high literary culture, minority poetic production is often treated as a dispensable add-on to this long tradition.<sup>4</sup>

If we replace *native* with *genuine* and *ethnic* with *social*, the statement above fits for workers' literature as well (save for the fact that workers can hardly be considered a minority if we do not restrict ourselves to those in factories). Of course, presupposed *genuineness* stems from the worker author's background-determined positionality, validating their viewpoints over other "intellectual" writers, who lack direct knowledge of what they write about, if not acquired through documentary inquiry, interviews, or even fieldwork. While this is often true, it is also reductive, and creates very limited lens for interpretation. The figure of the worker writer becomes intelligible only as a

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, 22.

repository of information on social reality, rather than a producer of a distinct literary world with its own characteristics, traditions and (inter)textualities. A trend generally seen in critical commentary and scholarship—as will become clearer in chapter Two—tends therefore to focus on *what* worker writers are saying, in their ability to expose the harsh truths of the dark corners of history, but often fail to connect this inquiry to *how* they are saying it, i.e. to the medium of their choice. Poetry and prose—fiction and nonfiction alike—are genres with rich global and local histories that need to be taken into account. For example, the images and tropes employed by worker poets may remain unintelligible if not submitted to a rigorous textual-literary analysis, their links would be missed, and texts would not be given their full dignity as *literary* texts. We would even be overlooking the cultural influence that can be seen at play there. What specific literary techniques do they employ? What can their formal and stylistic choices, besides their social context, add to the message conveyed by their works? What kinds of cultural influences shape the ways they interpret the world, the functions of writing, and themselves? In other words, how does intertextuality—one of the quintessential criteria for literariness—play out among worker authors? Are there discussions going on among them on literary matters? If not, can we spot shared preoccupations of form and style? And then, why do we read them? Is it because they are informative, or because they are meaningful in some other way? And can they be meaningful and informative at the same time? Without moving along these questions, we may fail to appreciate such authors as *worker writers*, rather than just *workers writing*.

The problem here is not so much to ascertain whether worker writers are predominantly mimetic or not, but to contest the whole binary opposition between the referential and the imaginative poles as problematic and artificial. It obfuscates the fact that the entanglement of a specific historical, social and political background and individual sensitivities, positionalities, experiences and psychologies is, ultimately, the reality of all literature. We need to turn our attention to the problem of hegemonic aesthetics, i.e. the kind of literature that is dominant within a

certain social formation in a specific historical period, which determines what types of works are worthy of literary legitimacy. The dissonance felt with works that do not conform with these standards reminds one of what Fredric Jameson wrote with regard to third-world literatures: “We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naïve, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share.”<sup>5</sup> While Jameson’s essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” may strike readers versed in the later development of scholarship as excessively essentialist in both its assumption that all “third-world literatures” are allegorical and its construction of an Other with interests we cannot share, his point is operational in the reception of workers’ literature, too (and that is true not only for upper-class readers, but also for working-class ones, equally influenced by the literary tastes that are dominant in society). A radical critique of aesthetics is in order to question the workings of cultural politics and legitimisation.

The first problem to unravel lies in worker writers’ lack of recognition as authors. This negation is at the base of their subsequent misrecognition as informants, or, in other words, objects of study rather than speaking and writing subjects. The problem is eminently aesthetic, because it addresses such basic questions as what can be considered literature, and who can be a literary author. It is also a political problem, because it calls into question the actors authorised to confer literary legitimacy. The paradox here lies in the fact that worker writers are often perceived as aesthetically insufficient, but this perception makes them unauthorised to question the dominant aesthetics because they are not considered fully *authors* in the first place. Another apparent contradiction haunting worker authors concerns the identity shift occurring when a worker becomes a writer. Do they remain workers, or join the upper spheres of the intelligentsia when “transgressing class boundaries” and “engaging in a cultural practice that is above [workers’] station,” in Sun

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<sup>5</sup> Jameson, “Third-World Literature,” 66.



Wanning's words?<sup>6</sup> This point will become clearer from interviews and conversations with and discussions on the worker writers and poets scrutinised in the course of the dissertation. The prestigious tradition of workers' literature in China apparently provides no ready-made answers. In general, the aesthetic appears like an insurmountable barrier, both preventing worker authors' obtainment of full literary dignity, and subjectively inducing them to feel inadequate for the task.

Notably, Michel Foucault attempted to address this question in his 1969 essay "What Is an Author?" Writing only two years after Roland Barthes had proclaimed the death of the (empirical) author as the unique holder of the keys of interpretation, Foucault appeared more interested in investigating "the modifications and variations, within any culture, of modes of circulation, valorisation, attribution, and appropriation" of literary writings, which he ascribed to the "mode of existence" of discourse.<sup>7</sup> In this understanding, the author is not simply an element of reality, i.e. a person who writes, but a property of discourse. Writings have no discursive value in themselves, but are legitimised through a process of consecration built around the "author." "What, for instance," Foucault wonders, "were Sade's papers before he was consecrated as an author? Little more, perhaps, than rolls of paper on which he endlessly unravelled his fantasies while in prison."<sup>8</sup> The core of his argument is that "the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others," and therefore "the function of the author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society."<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Foucault's essay contributes to demystifying the role of the author, stripping it of its pretence of universality. However, it does not further investigate how the cultural production industry and dominant aesthetic conceptions are interlinked and connect with social relations in general. In fact, Foucault

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<sup>6</sup> Sun Wanning, "Poetry of Labour," 187.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 313.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 302.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 305.

concludes that the historical reason for the author's individualisation and identification was for them to be punished in case they overstepped the established norms.

The effort to expose the mechanisms of literary creation lies at the core of Pierre Bourdieu's insightful work on artistic production, particularly through his *The Rules of Art* and *The Field of Cultural Production*. The notion of field is the necessary precondition for this exploration, as it allows for an understanding of cultural practice that is possible "only in the interaction between different authorities, agents, and the well-ordered position they occupy," such agents including not only authors themselves, but also their "necessary partners: critics, editors, mediators of all kinds,"<sup>10</sup> embroiled in a complex web of power and authority directly dependent on social relations—that is, ultimately, class relations. Such dynamics, external to the particular, concrete work of art, then play a role in establishing a certain aesthetic sensitivity (the eye itself, Bourdieu observes, has a social genesis). Bourdieu holds that "the history of the field is the history of the struggle for the monopoly of the imposition of legitimate categories of perception and appreciation,"<sup>11</sup> and continues that "who can be called a writer is decided in the course of this struggle."<sup>12</sup> To wit, then, the work of art becomes a "fetish," a game kept running by the "collusion of agents" that maintains alive the "illusion" of the creative genius separate from material conditions of production and circulation.<sup>13</sup> This illusion is precisely what unmarks certain authors and works and makes them seemingly (illusorily) neutral (so we have proletarian but not bourgeois literature, etc.). And it comes from

the monopoly of literary legitimacy, that is, among other things, the monopoly of the power to say with authority who is authorized to call himself [*sic*] a writer (etc.), or even to say who is a writer and

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<sup>10</sup> Dubois, "Pierre Bourdieu and Literature," 92.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 159.

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 228.

who has the authority to say who is a writer; or, if you prefer, the monopoly of the *power of consecration* of producers and products.

[But] if the literary field (etc.) is universally the site of a struggle over the definition of a writer (etc.), then *there is no unilateral definition of the writer*, and analyses never encounter anything but definitions corresponding to a state of the struggle for the imposition of the legitimate definition of the writer.

[...] to define *boundaries*, defend them and control entries is to defend the established order of the field. [...] It follows that the dominants have trouble defending themselves against the threat contained in any redefinition of the right of entry.<sup>14</sup>

The relevance of these passages for worker authors is manifest, especially if we consider the many concrete instances where their emergence and publicity has been possible only thanks to the patronage of cultural institutions, already-established writers and poets, or favourable political conditions, all of which are particularly true for China. In forming part of the “whole ensemble of those who help to ‘discover’” the writer and “consecrate” them,<sup>15</sup> these institutional actors inevitably also help establishing the unstable boundaries of workers’ literature, each, of course, according to their different motives and agendas, and therefore with different outcomes. While reminding us of the absence of any all-valid definition for what can be considered *workers’ literature*, this fact also highlights the role of “cultural mediators” in determining what brand or understanding of workers’ literature gain greater visibility and recognition (to be further discussed in chapters Two and Three). Yet, despite his observation that internal struggles in the field ultimately depend on social struggles,<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu’s analysis tends to remain on the empirical level of the actors of the field.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 224–226.

<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 167.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 42, 57.

A greater attention to the factors of those “external struggles” (social relations, historical conditions, political standpoints, and so forth) that influence the struggles of the field is likewise required to analyse the production of texts and aesthetic sensitivity. Forces such as the producer or multiple producers, the product itself (the work of art), the instruments to produce it, and the set of agents (publishers, mediators, patrons, private actors, institutions, academics, etc.), minutely identified by Bourdieu, taken together, make up what Eagleton, in *Criticism and Ideology*, terms the Literary Mode of Production (LMP). This formulation aims at elucidating the process of literary creation as “[a] unity of certain forces and social relations of literary production in a particular social formation.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, Eagleton clarifies that the LMP can be understood only in its direct subordination to the General Mode of Production, i.e. the organisation of the whole socio-economic system, which it reproduces not only in its structural organisation (we are not so far from the relation identified by Bourdieu between the struggles in the field and the struggles in society), but also in ideology. For Marx, ideology is pure knowledge, i.e. ideas separated from the existing reality which shape individuals’ understanding of such reality; and dominant ideas in a certain social formation always derive from the ideas of the ruling class, as “the ideal expression of dominant material relations[,] dominant material relations grasped as ideas.”<sup>18</sup> Eagleton follows up by identifying in literary language both the “agent” and “effect” of social struggles, but also “a zone in which such struggles achieve stabilisation,”<sup>19</sup> pointedly as dominant aesthetics. The forces that constitute the LMP, then, are not only those that specifically pertain to the field of literary production, and are not only external to the text. On the contrary, they are “internal constituents:”

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<sup>17</sup> Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *The German Ideology*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 54–55.

We are not merely concerned here with the sociological outworks of the text; we are concerned rather with how the text comes to be what it is because of the specific determinations of its mode of production. If LMPs are historically extrinsic to particular texts, they are equally internal to them: the literary text bears the impress of its historical mode of production as surely as any product secrets in its form and materials the fashion of its making. [...] One might add, too, that every literary text in some sense internalises its social relations of production – that every text intimates by its very conventions the way it is to be consumed, encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced.<sup>20</sup>

The LMP itself being only a component of a more complex materialist method of literary analysis, it has the advantage of highlighting the intimate link existing between social relations and aesthetic ideology. In the analytic framework of LMPs, social forces not only influence literary production, both externally and internally, but they also produce aesthetic ideologies, which in turn play a crucial role in the consecration of some texts and authors over others, in setting the boundaries of what is considered literature, and, last but not least, in canon formation. To an even more fundamental level, then, they heavily shape our sense of literariness—what we consider literature:

[I]t is not only a question of the ideological use of particular literary works; it is, more fundamentally, a question of the ideological significance of the cultural and academic institutionalisation of literature as such. What is finally at stake is not literary texts but Literature – the ideological significance of that process whereby certain historical texts are severed from their social formations, defined as ‘literary’, bound and ranked together to constitute a series of ‘literary traditions’ and interrogated to yield a set of ideologically presupposed responses.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 48.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 56–57.

The reflection comes full circle. Authors' class background matters precisely because it is decisive in establishing how such authors and their works are going to be produced, received, (mis)recognised. This array of conditions involves not only visible, clearly identifiable forces that hold the keys to the editorial processes of production and distribution (editors, publishing houses, mediators, institutions, etc.). Training in or lack thereof, exposure to, acceptance or rejection of dominant forms of narrative and discourse, and everything that pertains to the "invisible," immaterial forms of consciousness also influence literary creation, and are often based on class background. The alternative is not only a binary between inclusion and rejection: there may be, and indeed there are, halfway situations and contradictory realities, even within cultural institutions and among institutional actors. But unpacking the way hegemonic aesthetic ideology comes into being is crucial to understand the aesthetic dissonance generated by authors and texts coming from outside the dominant literary mode of production, and to interpret it not only "negatively" as a challenge to dominant ideology, but also "positively" as valid proposals for thinking alternative aesthetic possibilities.

## **1.2. Prologues: social experience and its aesthetics in New Culture**

It is relevant to consider how writers' relation with social reality has been articulated in Chinese literary thought, with special emphasis on the turbulent period of innovation in the early 20th century that goes under the names of the New Culture Movement (*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化运动, beginning approximately in 1915), the May Fourth Movement (*wusi yundong* 五四运动) of 1919, and the literary revolution (*wenxue geming* 文学革命) of the 1920s. A brief exploration into the matter is motivated by the fact that May Fourth writers' engagement with reality compelled them to confront issues that were eminently aesthetic, above all the relation between social

commitment and artistic elevation, beauty and truthfulness (or experience), not to mention language. All these issues would be central in the first experiments at proletarian literature, as well, and have remained central in contemporary literary aesthetics, well encapsulated in the triad of *zhen* 真, truth, *shan* 善, moral, and *mei* 美, beauty.

Despite the traditional elitism of China's ruling dynasties with regard to writing, partly due to the integration of the art with the imperial examination system and the general process for the selection of the officialdom, high and low literatures were historically imbricated. The *Shijing* 诗经 (*Classic of Poetry*) is partly based on songs strongly believed to have folk origins. While poets of later centuries were expected to interpret the outside world through personal emotions, and do so by employing allusions, consolidated metaphors and an intangible canon of diachronic intertextuality based on the established old classics, poetry—as the main literary genre in use until the great novels of the Ming dynasty, although the novel remained a lesser-status form of expression until May Fourth—always had an eminently social role, perfectly illustrated by Michelle Yeh:

In a society founded on Confucian ethics and pragmatism, it served several purposes, the loftiest as the cornerstone of moral cultivation and cultural refinement. This notion was sanctified by Confucius in the *Analects* (*Lunyu*), where poetry came first in the “three-part curriculum” leading to moral perfection, along with ritual (*li*) and music (*yue*). In the political realm, poetry was a practical means of advancing oneself in the world, since literary skills in general were essential for passing the civil service examination[.] Finally, on a more pedestrian level, poetry served as a common form of communication with family, friends, and colleagues, as innumerable classical poems written for every imaginable occasion can attest.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Yeh, *Modern Chinese Poetry*, 13.

Yet, literature also remained a territory for the educated elite, which largely made up the imperial mandarin. After all, the Confucian tradition had established a clear-cut division of labour and power based on cultural capital, captured by Mencius' dictum that "Those who work with their brains rule, and those who work with their brawns are ruled" (勞心者治人, 勞力者治於人). In particular, the perpetual use of *wenyanwen* 文言文, or "literary Chinese," based on an aulic and highly conventional register, was fundamental to preserve literature as an almost exclusive realm for the literati. It is no surprise, then, that language was the first element that came under the attack of literary reformers and revolutionists of the early decades of the 20th century, who would struggle to liberate it from the rusted chains of tradition. Spearheaded by the journal *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (*New Youth*) and the radical ideas of Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 and Hu Shi 胡适, and by the practice of new writers, above all Lu Xun 鲁迅, Yu Dafu 郁达夫, Lao She 老舍, and others, they promoted *baihua* 白话, or vernacular Chinese, as a way to modernise and democratise language, to different degrees. Simultaneously, they drew heavily from European, Russian and American literatures, and repositioned themselves as intellectuals who found in an active engagement with social and political change their new *raison d'être*.

The liberation of language was equated with the liberation of form and content, and this process would have disposed of "the ornate, obsequious language of aristocrats" (雕琢的阿谀的贵族文学), as Chen Duxiu called it in "Wenxue geming lun" 文学革命论 (On Literary Revolution), to give way to "the plain, expressive literature of the people" (平易的抒情的国民文学) and "the clear, popular literature of the society" (明了的通俗的社会文学).<sup>23</sup> Now, the contours of the category of the people are all but clear-cut, and change in fundamental ways according to the political and sociocultural contexts where they are employed. In China, the association of political and cultural revolution in the nineteen-tens pushed writers to take the stance of the people as

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<sup>23</sup> Chen Duxiu, "Wenxue geming lun," 22 (cited and translated in Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 27–28).



opposed to the elite of the crumbling state—and its cultural apparatus. Yet, inconsistencies between the proclamation of the “popular” character of May Fourth literature and its arguably “elitist” forms began to manifest soon. While May Fourth writers attacked the obscurity and sumptuousness of elite culture, they also despised what they saw as the trivial and obsolete literature that was comparatively popular at the time, adopting styles and contents from their Western references that were generally alien to lower-class readers. The categories of “high” and “low” were thrown in a conceptual (and taxonomic) hodgepodge as a result. People active in the New Culture Movement were aware of it. Zhou Zuoren 周作人, for instance, attempted to unravel the knot by making a distinction between the democratic character of new literature, using the word that described the “common people” (*pingmin* 平民), and what pertained to the popular (*tongsu* 通俗—that Chen Duxiu had used with a positive ring). New literature was democratic, yes, but not because it was written by or for the common people (we are back to issues of authorship and audience again). It sought to explore life in a liberated way but without getting down to the level of the (uneducated) people, rather by uplifting them, and in this sense it was not exactly “popular.”<sup>24</sup>

In fact, the opposition of May Fourth writers against the elite culture of their time was grounded in a strong belief in the high literary form, that they considered mortified by the moralism and decadence of the late mandarins. This belief allowed them to consider themselves popular and anti-elite while at the same time drawing binary oppositions of aesthetic nature, such as seriousness versus entertainment, social commitment versus mundanity, aesthetic value versus market consumption. The mutually negating ambiguity between popular as revolutionary and progressive on the one hand, and popular as the arguably backward taste of an uneducated people on the other, would continue to keep the offshoots of May Fourth theoretically busy, proletarian and left-wing literatures included. In fact, these discussions would possibly become even more relevant when the vague notion of the “people” and the “popular” took on more precise connotations as the masses of

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<sup>24</sup> Liping Feng, “Democracy and Elitism.”

urban workers and rural peasants as a large part of New Culture intellectuals radicalised on the path of Marxism.

Another aspect of the “democracy” and “popularity” of May Fourth literature took the form of truthfulness, fidelity to reality, and ultimately realism. It was not only a moral imperative resulting from intellectuals’ intention to actively engage with society by mirroring the plight of the oppressed in their work, condensed in the expression of art for life’s sake. It was also a tenet of the new literary theory produced at the time. In the discussions carried out within the Association of Literary Studies, the author’s experience (*jingyan* 经验) was given high status as an aesthetic attribute that would confer truth and individuality to the work of literature, which was also connected to the aesthetic principle of *zhen*, truth. Experience had a subjective side, represented by feelings and sentiments, but needed to be supplemented by observation (*guan cha* 观察) to become part of an organic knowledge of reality. Far from any vulgar “naturalism,” theorists of the Association believed that this totality could ultimately be expressed through imagination (*xiangxiangli* 想象力), a sort of processing of the fragmentary information provided by experience.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, the radical practice of May Fourth and the theoretical discussions among intellectuals emerged from that experience assigned a key role to truth, acquired through observation and experience. Both categories would remain central in the various literary configurations that followed. Writers who positioned themselves on the left took great effort in finding the most productive way to observe (and represent) the reality of society and the labouring people, ultimately deciding to (and eventually being mandated to) go among the people themselves to acquire first-hand experience of life.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the high value attributed to experience would probably exert a certain influence on theorists who promoted the primacy of artworks produced directly by labourers—whereby the word *directly* does not seek to ignore the actual process of production of

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<sup>25</sup> Pesaro, “Autore e struttura,” 187–190.

<sup>26</sup> Pesaro, “Fiction of Left-Wing Writers.”

such works, where other actors than creators alone inevitably played certain roles, but rather refers to class background and collocation as a criterion for authorship. Almost paradoxically, after the so-called “proletarian episode” of the 1920s, where writers who did not come from the working class proclaimed themselves able to write “proletarian literature,” this conflation of observation and experience sometimes even resulted in actively choosing *not* to write on proletarian themes. In 1931, for instance, Lu Xun openly advised Sha Ting 沙汀 and Ai Wu 艾芜 to recognise their strangeness to the proletarian class and rather chose to write about what they had truly experience, like life in their home villages.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.3. Anticipations: theory from proletarian to worker-peasant-soldier literature

It was in this context of germinating relations between cultural upheaval and revolutionary politics that the first instances of literary expression by the labouring classes came about. The conversion to Marxism on the part of new writers emerged from May Fourth, their increased political participation, and, subsequently, the establishment of the League of Left-Wing Writers on 2 March 1930 were fundamental steps in this process. Initially, the call to merge literature and the reality of the bottoms of society materialised in the separate but closely interrelated processes of proletarian literature (*puluo wenxue* 普罗文学, since the phonetic translation *puluolietaliya* 普洛列塔利亚 was still preferred over the later *wuchanjieji* 无产阶级) and the popularisation or massification of literature (*wenxue dazhonghua* 文学大众化). Both phenomena concerned themselves with the creation of a form of literature that could speak to workers and the lower strata of society in general, be intelligible by them, and possibly be authored by them. Both also constantly struggled to evolve from slogans into operational realities.

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<sup>27</sup> Yang Yi, *Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo shi*, 448 (cited in Pesaro and Pirazzoli, *La narrativa cinese del Novecento*, 202).

In the eyes of many politically committed writers of the 1920s, acquiring an awareness of class struggle and politics and speaking the language of workers and peasants were essential prerequisites for producing revolutionary literature (*geming wenxue* 革命文学).<sup>28</sup> Guo Moruo 郭沫若, previously a romantic and a central figure of literary renovation, called himself a “proletarian” as early as 1921, at the same time while Yu Dafu was advocating class struggle in literature. As these facts show, the definition of proletarian writers was based on criteria that were fairly loose: adopting a proletarian “class standpoint” (*jieji lichang* 阶级立场) was primary with respect to having a class background. Around the same period, Mao Dun 茅盾, himself a leading person among left-wing writers, distinguished between revolutionary literature, vindictive and destructive, and proletarian literature, inspired by lofty ideals, but possible only after the proletariat had seized power; by contrast, he dismissed as crude and shallow the kind of sloganeering “proletarian” literature promoted by the Creation Society (*chuangzaoshe* 创造社) and Sun Society (*taiyang she* 太阳社), two of the literary societies sprouted out of May Fourth that had gradually grown more militant.<sup>29</sup> This plurality of understandings of the nature and traits of proletarian literature, more or less rooted in Marxist theory, mirrored similar debates that had been taking place in the Soviet Union. However, while proletarian literature was pushed forward by societies and groups that were to remain relatively minor in the early Soviet literary environment, its advocates in China held a considerable influence within the Communist Party for a certain period of time (which Sylvia Chan attributes to the “adventurist” line of urban insurgencies in the late 1920s).<sup>30</sup>

And in fact, while the heritage of May Fourth musings on observation and experience is clear, Soviet influence over these discussions should not be overlooked, and noting it is actually helpful to

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<sup>28</sup> Iovene and Picerni, “Chinese Workers’ Literature.”

<sup>29</sup> Chan, “Realism or Socialist Realism?”, 58. On literary societies, see also Hockx, *Questions of Style*.

<sup>30</sup> Chan, “Realism or Socialist Realism?”, 60–61.

place the evolution of proletarian literature in China within its global context. Writings by Alexander Bogdanov, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Georgy Plekhanov and Sergei Tretyakov circulated widely among intellectuals, and so did other documents from the Soviet debates on proletarian literature.<sup>31</sup> In particular, the Proletkult group, established by Bogdanov in 1917, displayed an open refusal of the literary canon and endorsed the creation of a new culture (for a new social order) by writers who were genuinely proletarian. This genuineness would be guaranteed by self-taught workers, who would remain in the factory to avoid the moral corruption of the intelligentsia. Poetry was considered to be the privileged genre of this movement.<sup>32</sup> Other groups included Kuznitsa, which also favoured poetry, and strongly asserted that class background was a non-negotiable condition; the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, by contrast, privileged adherence to a party mindset. Gradually, a proletarian outlook and active contribution to the economic cause of the proletarian state became paramount, and Katerina Clark contends that socialist realism replaced proletarian literature also in matters of perspective: Stalinism viewed socialism as based on the supremacy of cadres and engineers, which led to a gradual replacement of worker-heroes by members of the elite in literature, too.<sup>33</sup> Although the chill of the Stalin era terminated the intensive debates of the early Soviet years, the possibility for a proletarian literature to arise mechanically from its authors' class belonging (later termed the "Proletkult delusion") had always found little approval in the Bolshevik leading group. In particular, Trotsky did not mask his scepticism towards proletarian literature, and especially poetry, where he saw a chasm between its unquestioned political quality and an apparent lack of organic integration with culture in general. Proletarian poems, he claimed, were "significant cultural and historical documents," but "weak and, what is more, illiterate poems [that] do not make up proletarian poetry, because they do not make up poetry

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*; Pickowicz, "Ch'ü Ch'iu-pai."

<sup>32</sup> Clark, "Working-Class Literature and/or Proletarian Literature," 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 21, 25.

at all.” He contended that “The work of the proletarian poets lacks an organic quality, which is produced only by a profound interaction between art and the development of culture in general. We have the literary works of talented and gifted proletarians, but that is not proletarian literature.” For these reasons, Trotsky believed that the Soviet state had the task to make already existing culture accessible to the broad masses of the uneducated people through education, to make them able to master the rules and criteria of art and literature, and realise that organic integration he did not see in what Kuznitsa and other groups called “proletarian culture.”<sup>34</sup>

Given that Trotsky’s thought was later rejected by the Chinese Communist Party, it is surprising to find a clear echo of his ideas in the man who was held as the symbol of literature in revolutionary China, i.e. Lu Xun. Although clearly affiliated with left-wing literature, Lu Xun was wary of the inadequacies of the endeavour he was also promoting. On the one hand, he was sceptical of the actual role played by proletarian literature in promoting social change, and even more sceptical of those who, like Guo Moruo and the Creation Society, just adopted proletarian literature as “a name.”<sup>35</sup> He thought that it would be possible for individual proletarian authors to emerge, but he also saw the risk of them just gaining “their small corner in the world of letters” bolstering their ego and making them “become divorced from the proletariat and gone over the old society.”<sup>36</sup> Echoing Trotsky again, Lu Xun also displayed a practical mind in arguing that revolutionary literature cannot be born during a revolution, because “When revolution arrives, there will be no literature, no voice anymore. This is because, under the influence of the revolutionary tide, everyone has shifted from shouting to action.”<sup>37</sup> What can be considered revolutionary literature before the revolution “complains of suffering and cries out against inequities” and “has no

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<sup>34</sup> Trotsky, “Proletarian Literature and Proletarian Art,” 166–167.

<sup>35</sup> Lu Xun, “An Overview of the Present State of New Literature,” 223.

<sup>36</sup> Lu Xun, “Thoughts on the League of Left-Wing Writers,” 106.

<sup>37</sup> Lu Xun, “Literature in Times of Revolution,” 204.

influence on the revolution.”<sup>38</sup> And yet, his mistrust in the “revolutionary” power of literature (understood as its ability to replace practical action in transforming social conditions) by no means prevented Lu Xun from praising a utilitarian form of literature that could serve political purposes. Literature could be used for propaganda, he argued, because “all art is propaganda.” However, not differently from Trotsky, who valued the organicity of literature produced by proletarians above its simple authorial form, Lu Xun considered the propagandistic use of literature to be one more reason, according to him, to be more concerned with “solid content and technique of the highest calibre” than labels, because “revolution [...] needs to employ literature precisely because it is art.”<sup>39</sup>

Among the participants in debates around proletarian literature and popularisation in China at the time, one of the most prolific polemicists and politically central figures was Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白. He took an organising role in the activities of the young Communist Party, before rising to its interim leader following Chen Duxiu’s dismissal in August 1927. The failure of insurrections carried out under his leadership led to his rapid dismissal less than a year later, which actually allowed him to concentrate on cultural matters. Qu thought that the new proletarian art should make a clear break with its feudal and bourgeois predecessors. In order to do so, it must favour proletarian authorship, for the political quality of “genuinely” proletarian authors was incomparably superior to petit-bourgeois intellectuals writing on behalf of proletarians. To support his thesis, Qu compared Vladimir Mayakovsky, a bourgeois writer converted to the revolution but still limited by his class background, and the less-known Sergey Semyonov, whose authentically proletarian origin made him an ideal candidate for starting a proletarian literary movement.<sup>40</sup>

However, Qu was not oblivious to the fact that such writers did not exist in large numbers, and proletarian literature had to accommodate authors from other classes, as well. This posed a

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 203.

<sup>39</sup> Lu Xun, “Literature and Revolution: A Reply,” 219.

<sup>40</sup> Pickowicz, “Qu Qiubai’s Critique of the May Fourth Generation.”

problem of theory. One of the writings where Qu articulated his theory of proletarian literature was “Puluo dazhong wenyi de xianshi wenti” 普罗大众文艺的现实问题 (Actual Problems in Mass Proletarian Literature and Art), published in *Wenxue* 文学 (*Literature*), a handout of the League of Left-Wing Writers, in April 1932. Qu introduced the subject by admitting that “Embryos of proletarian literature and art do not exist yet, there are only the theory and the so-called progenitors of proletarian literature and art” (普罗文艺的胚胎还没有，只有普罗文艺的理论和所谓前辈).<sup>41</sup> With subtle irony, he contended that their “mother” was not interested in giving birth because she had learned the fashionable lifestyles of Paris and was too occupied with being modern and running after a celebrity’s life. The implicit criticism against Europeanised intellectuals coming from the New Culture experience is blatant. Chinese letters were divided in two camps: the vernacular *baihua* 白话 literature of the May Fourth style, intellectual and Europeanised, and the old *zhanghuiti* 章回体 style, fit for “sordid petty merchants” (市侩小百姓).<sup>42</sup> While the latter was utterly reactionary, the former had failed at its task of becoming popularised, and remained in the service of an intellectual reading public. Not taking the common people as the target audience of May Fourth literature was something Zhou Zuoren professed his pride for, while Qu saw it as the source of all problems. Literature’s primary aim, for Qu, was precisely to culturally arm the labouring people. However, it was facing various obstacles, that Qu encapsulated in a number of questions.

The first question was “What language to write with” (用什么话写). Qu was convinced that a new vernacular was to be achieved through a more thorough revolution in language, this time led by the proletariat, to finally bridge the language gap between commoners and intellectuals (he cited Mu Shiying 穆时英 and Zhang Tianyi 张天翼 as positive examples who used the language of the

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<sup>41</sup> Qu Qiubai, “Puluo dazhong wenyi,” 457.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 458.



masses).<sup>43</sup> Actually, the high vernacular language employed by many writers of the May Fourth tradition had been questioned by other contemporaries as too above-ground. For Qu, the criterion was quite simple as it was incisive: “Every time [a work] is read to workers, they can understand it” (当读给工人听的时候，他们可以懂得;<sup>44</sup> vis-à-vis Mao Dun who complained that proletarians could not understand their works of fiction even if read aloud to them).<sup>45</sup> The practical side-effect would be elevating proletarians’ cultural level and therefore forming new writers from among them (although he was aware of the huge obstacles posed by widespread illiteracy).<sup>46</sup> As a consequence, and addressing the second question, “What to write” (写什么东西), form was to be as popular as possible, therefore making ample use of “old forms” (旧式) while promoting their “reformation” (加以改革) to gradually create new forms (新式).<sup>47</sup> Popularisation had to come first, forms could evolve later. Closely connected to this issue was the third question, “Why to write” (为什么而写). Proletarian literature had different aims according to its different functions. It should propagandise and disseminate political standpoints, although it should also be called on to improve its artistic quality (应当尽可能地叫它艺术化) to avoid plain “sloganism” (标语口号主义).<sup>48</sup> It should produce works reflecting workers’ daily life in struggle (strikes, land reform, etc.), painting a bad picture of the enemy and promoting positive political values; all genres were acceptable. The representation of social life should be privileged over apolitical themes, in order to break the grip of feudal and petty-bourgeois mentality. In order to do so (“How to write”, 怎么样去写), it would be

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 461.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, 465.

<sup>45</sup> Chan, “Realism or Socialist Realism?”, 68.

<sup>46</sup> Pickowicz, “Ch’ü Ch’iu-pai,” 305.

<sup>47</sup> Qu, “Puluo dazhong wenyi,” 467.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, 469.

necessary to resist sentimentalism and humanism, let go of individualism and heroism, promote cooperative writing,<sup>49</sup> and opposeedulcorating reality (脸谱主义).

总之，普罗大众文艺的斗争任务，是要在思想上武装群众，意识上无产阶级化，要开始一个级广大的反对青天白日主义的斗争。五四时期的反对礼教斗争只限于知识分子，这是一个资产阶级的自由主义启蒙主义的文艺运动。我们要有一个“无产阶级‘五四’”。

In short, the fighting tasks of proletarian literature and art consist in ideologically arming the masses, in promoting the proletarianisation of consciousness, and it must start an extremely vast struggle against the ideology of the White Sun in Blue Sky [the Kuomintang emblem—Tr.]. The struggle of the May Fourth period against ritual education was limited to intellectuals. It was a liberal and illuminist literary and artistic movement of the bourgeois class. We need a “proletarian ‘May Fourth.’”<sup>50</sup>

Such a literature that explicitly embraced a dignified form of didacticism and utilitarianism was faced with several practical issues, that Qu recapitulated under the fifth and final question, “What we should do” (要干些什么). Qu strongly advocated a “street literary movement” (街头文学运动), the promotion (*en passant*, not unlike Proletkult in Russia)<sup>51</sup> of the “worker-peasant correspondence movement” (工农通讯运动) to train proletarians to acquire their own expressive language, and the formation of new cultural cadres from among the labouring masses.<sup>52</sup> However, it was nothing that could be accomplished in the short term. In a sort of cultural replication of the

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<sup>49</sup> Not incidentally, Eagleton associates working-class writing with “cooperative publishing enterprises,” able to produce a literature which “challenges and changes the existing social relations between writers, publishers, readers and other literary workers” (*Literary Theory*, 188).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 472.

<sup>51</sup> Clark, “Working-Class Literature and/or Proletarian Literature.”

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, 478–479.

two-stage theory that mistrusted the possibility to carry out a proletarian revolution before the completion of the bourgeois revolution (a legacy of Kautskyian Marxism, resurrected by Stalinism), first came the popularisation of literature, as the last stage of the bourgeois-democratic movement, cultural and political alike; and only then a whole new movement actively participated by the proletariat would have been possible, ushering in genuine “revolutionary popular art” (革命大众文艺).<sup>53</sup>

While he was more concerned than others with the training of “authentic” proletarian authors, Qu also admitted that proletarian literature might be produced by writers from other class backgrounds. In general, Chinese left-wing literature saw a coexistence between two notions of proletarian literature, one privileging its authorial side, and another one considering subject matter and perspective to be preeminent. It was the latter position that gradually took hold. The League itself declared its adoption of a proletarian standpoint in the form of its embrace of dialectical materialism, but gave no exclusiveness to proletarian themes—or authors. This conclusion was arguably the result of an admission of failure by writers with petty-bourgeois backgrounds, like Tian Han 田汉, to produce convincing works of art on the life of the proletariat, a failure motivated by their formulaic knowledge of social life, coming more from a dogmatic acceptance of Marxism than from lived experience.<sup>54</sup> Again, local necessities were imbricated with global circumstances. The Kharkov Conference of 1930, “the first serious attempt by the international cultural left to formulate a unified program for revolutionary artists and writers,” strongly dominated by Soviet critics,<sup>55</sup> saw the triumph of an outlook based on revolutionary perspective rather than authorship or other criteria, which was then circulated through the Comintern-affiliated International Union of Revolutionary Writers, of which the League of Left-Wing Writers was the official Chinese section.

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<sup>53</sup> Pickowicz, “Ch’ü Ch’iu-pai,” 301.

<sup>54</sup> Chan, “Realism or Socialist Realism?,” 65.

<sup>55</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 73.

Zhou Yang 周扬, who would be remembered as the topmost representative of the cultural bureaucracy in the first two decades of the PRC, known as “the seventeen years” (*qishinian* 七十年) before the Cultural Revolution, was a vocal advocate of this line. In debates within the League he took a firm position in favour of the possibility for non-proletarian writers to write proletarian literature as long as they adopted a revolutionary worldview.<sup>56</sup> In his 1932 essay, “Guanyu wenxue dazhonghua” 关于文学大众化 (Concerning the Popularisation of Literature), he still promoted the worker correspondence movement as a way to educate new writers. Granted, their works had no proper literary value to speak of, but the movement was a way to bring workers into writing, to eventually push back the necessary evil of the revolutionary literature provisionally written by petty-bourgeois authors, and ultimately bring about an authentic proletarian revolutionary literature.<sup>57</sup> It would not be long, however, before the Japanese aggression in 1931 and all-out invasion in 1937 compelled writers and critics to reconsider their priorities. “National defence literature” (*guofang wenxue* 国防文学), promoted in the context of the anti-Japanese united front between the CPC and the Kuomintang, and left-wing writers’ transition into the broader Chinese Writers Association (where the League merged in July 1937), brought terms like “people” (*renmin* 人民) and “nation” (*minzu* 民族) to the fore. Proletarian themes were pushed back as a result. In a polemic with Xu Xing 徐行, nom de plume of Xu Hefu 徐褐夫, who questioned the classless character of this literary reconfiguration, Zhou observed that a proletarian perspective could not be considered a *sine qua non* for national defence literature. Anti-imperialism was to be its main defining factor, although Zhou recognised the need to “point out” (指出) how non-revolutionary writers’ petty-bourgeois consciousness hindered the correct course of China’s revolution.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Chan, “Realism or Socialist Realism?”, 68.

<sup>57</sup> Zhou Yang, *Zhou Yang wenji*, 29, 30.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 172.

The gradual devaluation of proletarian authorship was evident in Zhou Yang's "Wenxue yu shenghuo mantan" 文学与生活漫谈 (Remarks on Literature and Life). The article, published in July 1941, i.e. in the midst of the literary debates that were taking place in the CCP headquarters of Yan'an, besides being one of Zhou's most interesting works, also "acted as one of the CCP's final words on the role of literature before Mao's renowned 'Talks.'" <sup>59</sup> The essay was entirely preoccupied with the writer's relation with reality from a philosophical point of view. Zhou argued that the writer must elevate above life, but that was possible only after having penetrated it. Complete detachment, typical of intellectuals, resulted in the impossibility to truly look at life and represent its truth. To some degree, it adapted to the process of moving from practical activity to theoretical elaboration and back to practice illustrated by Mao in *Maodun lun* 矛盾论 (*On Contradiction*) just a few years earlier. Workers were considered only in their role as readers, no longer as potential writers whose literary skills were to be trained, although they would have perfectly matched the figure of the writer immersed in social reality. The issue was rather to promote intellectuals' engagement with society to combine their writing talent with first-hand knowledge of social life. Qu Qiubai himself had made no mystery of his dissatisfaction with "Europeanised vagabonds" ("欧洲化" 无业游民) who thought there was no need for themselves to investigate and experience social life below.<sup>60</sup> In the impossibility to have legions of worker and peasant writers due to structural reasons, illiteracy above all, it was paramount for intellectuals to represent social reality, and in order to do so, Zhou argued, they had to blend in with the people's masses.

These views would be condensed, summed up, and, above all, officialised in Mao's "Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua" 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话 (Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art), delivered in May 1942. The "Talks" are usually interpreted as

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<sup>59</sup> Rubin, "Writers' Discontent and Party Response," 80.

<sup>60</sup> Qu Qiubai, "Puluo dazhong wenyi," 473.

interdictions against dissenting voices coming from the cultural life at Yan'an, which was indeed being suffocated by the Rectification Campaign carried out by the CCP in the early 1940s. Nevertheless, their prescriptive nature in pointing out not only the character of new literature, but also, as Bonnie McDougall notes, a specific literary theory, should not be overlooked. Much can be said and has been said on the "Talks", and an analysis of their general features goes well beyond our purposes here. However, as remarked by McDougall, one of the foremost questions addressed by the "Talks" was that of audience—the same problem that tormented left-wing writers in the aftermath of May Fourth. In Mao, the relationship between the writer and the audience is reversed, as the centre of gravity is shifted from the former to the latter.<sup>61</sup> But this point reiterated the problem of positionality. The main target of the "Talks" were educated writers who did not come from the masses but were urged to write for the masses. While in practice this was a recognition of a truth, i.e. widespread illiteracy, backwardness and lack of cultural instruments available for the large majority of the Chinese population (it should not be forgotten that the CCP had firmly relocated to rural areas), in theory it continued to confer primacy to intellectuals going among the masses, learning from them, familiarising with their living conditions, and finding out about their cultural expressions, language, and so forth—an activity that was historically championed by Chinese anarchists, and then by Communist intellectuals such as Cheng Fangwu 成仿吾 and Guo Moruo. However, workers and peasants were understood more as readers than writers, the significant Other of educated writers that they had to bridge with, and fidelity to their living conditions and political struggles (mediated through the party line) became guidelines to evaluate writers' ideology, or criteria for punishment.<sup>62</sup> To connect with the schematisation used in the first section of this chapter, the question of authorship (by whom) was increasingly side-lined in favour

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<sup>61</sup> McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art,"* 22–23.

<sup>62</sup> Rubin, "Writers' Discontent and Party Response," 82.

of readership (for whom) and perspective.<sup>63</sup> The bureaucratised form of this approach would become known as “genre determinism,” or *tikai jue ding lun* 题材决定论, which also assigned primacy to the subject matter.

*En passant*, this shift, which was also a continuation of previous debates on the value of folk culture (defended by Qu Qiubai as a means to spread literacy) and critiques levelled on the abstruse language of May Fourth writers, was also influenced by a similar reconfiguration in Soviet discussions and within the Third International. The Yan’an debates saw an articulated opposition between the advocates of “national forms” (*minzu xingshi* 民族形式) and those who defended the innovations of May Fourth and the inspiration of world literature. Among the few detecting Soviet influences on these debates, Edoarda Masi points out that, in the same period, György Lukács and Andrei Zhdanov, both leading authorities in the Comintern cultural apparatus (especially Zhdanov), had awarded their patronage to the tradition of Europe’s grand bourgeois novel, and associates their positions with the staunchest defenders of May Fourth, like Hu Feng 胡风.<sup>64</sup> But it can also be argued that the eclipse of the “proletarian episode” in Chinese literature was likewise influenced by the transition of Soviet literature to its schematic (and nationalised) form of socialist realism.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Pickowicz, “Ch’ü Ch’iu-pai,” 314.

<sup>64</sup> Masi, *Storie del bosco letterario*, 179–180.

<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, a more insightful analysis of Marxist and Leninist theorisations on literature goes beyond the purposes of this chapter, apart from some isolated comments. It must be pointed out, however, that no direct patrilineal line exists between Marx, Engels or Lenin and Soviet-style (or even Chinese-style) socialist realism. They did not contribute in a substantial way to experiments that styled themselves as proletarian literature either. Engels was notably wary of partisan art, making it particularly explicit in his praise of Balzac’s realism depicting “the downfall of his favourite nobles” despite “his own class sympathies and political prejudices” (“Letter to Margaret Harkness,” 117), or by suggesting that socialist novelists refrain from revealing their political aims and just make them “manifest from the situation and the action themselves without being expressly pointed out” (“Letter to Mina Kautsky,” 113). But these were only letters, not consistent works of solid theory. Lenin only dedicated sparse writings to art and artists, helpfully

After the “Talks” became the basic guidelines for the CPC cultural policy, Zhou Yang held that new literature was the result of writers’ study of the “literature and art in its sprout form” (萌芽状态的文艺) by the masses, the loftiest expression of the integration between popularisation and national forms.<sup>66</sup> In addition, he recognised that, beside “literary and art workers” (文艺工作者), i.e. professional writers and artists, a continued “literary and art movement carried out by workers,

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brought together in a critical analysis by R. K. Dasgupta, including the famous 1905 article, “Party Organisation and Party Literature,” where Lenin coined the famous “cogs and screws” phrase that would become so central in China. Dasgupta attempts to clarify some misunderstandings around Lenin’s ideas on “party literature” by stressing that it was “not a call for controlling literature” but “a call for the liberation of literature” against Czarist censorship (“Lenin and Literature,” 17). However, he overlooks the strong ambiguity between literature as creative art and literature as political press in Lenin’s article, which could also have been misunderstood in Chinese as *wenxue* 文学 instead of *wenxian* 文献 or *chubanwu* 出版物, two terms that replaced *wenxue* in later translations (see Benton, “Lu Xun and Leon Trotsky”). This is part of what Lenin wrote:

Far be it from us to advocate any kind of standardised system, or a solution by means of a few decrees. Cut-and-dried schemes are least of all applicable here. [...] Emerging from the captivity of the feudal censorship, we have no desire to become, and shall not become, prisoners of bourgeois-shopkeeper literary relations. We want to establish, and we shall establish, a free press, free not simply from the police, but also from capital, from careerism, and what is more, free from bourgeois-anarchist individualism. [...] [W]e are discussing party literature and its subordination to party control. Everyone is free to write and say whatever he likes, without any restrictions. [...] All Social-Democratic literature must become Party literature. (“Party Organisation and Party Literature,” 24–25, 27)

Of course, this is quite different from saying that all literature created in society must be subordinate to the party, but the ambiguity between creative literature and political press persists. Dasgupta, anyway, contends that these words were not “the basis of an official policy of controlling literary activity when the revolution was over” (18), also based upon Lenin’s remarks that artists were to be granted creative freedom and the actual agility enjoyed by Soviet literary circles before they were all brought under state and party control in the late 1920s.

<sup>66</sup> Zhou Yang, *Zhou Yang wenji*, 518.



peasants and soldiers themselves in their spare time” (工农兵自己业余的文艺活动),<sup>67</sup> carried out primarily through art and drama troupes in the army and the villages (the latter sometimes without scripts), or poetry. However, while lambasting those who diminished their cultural value and urging professional writers to guide them and, at the same time, absorb their contributions, Zhou insisted that workers’, peasants’ and soldiers’ cultural activity should be strictly confined to their spare time. Production or military duty were to remain their top priority.<sup>68</sup>

This was also the period that popularised the triple formula of “worker-peasant-soldier” (*gongnongbing* 工农兵), used by Mao in his “Talks,” but whose origins can be traced back to the 1930s.<sup>69</sup> Works written by workers-peasants-soldiers themselves, or also professional writers with worker-peasant-soldier themes (mainly class struggle, land reform, and national liberation), in line with Mao’s “Talks,” were ascribed to the genre of worker-peasant-soldier literature.<sup>70</sup> Already practiced in the CCP-governed Liberated Areas, worker-peasant-soldier literature became prominent after the establishment of the People’s Republic. Given the primacy assigned to works authored by individuals who were real workers and peasants themselves, the genre widely consisted in amateur productions, which makes it difficult to identify numerous outstanding representatives. Cao Ming 草明 was among its most visible interpreters. Her novels, *Yuandongli* 原动力 (*Power*, 1948) and *Chengfeng polang* 乘风破浪 (*Riding the Wind*, 1959), exalted factory workers and depicted an industrial scenery imbued with positive values and based on a harmonious relationship between humans and machines. Her writing career doubled with her activism, and in the 1950s she formed and mentored the Anshan Workers’ Amateur Literature Writing Group (*Anshan gongren yeyu wenxue chuanguo zu* 鞍山工人业余文学创作组), which was one of the most successful

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, 521.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, 525–526.

<sup>69</sup> Liu Jiang, “Gongnongbing wenxue de shige fazhan tansong,” 29.

<sup>70</sup> Julia C. Lin, *Modern Chinese Poetry*, 240.

workers' writing workshops, along with the Tianjin Workers' Literature Creation Society (*Tianjinshi gongren wenxue chuanguo she* 天津市工人文学创作社).<sup>71</sup> The overlapping of state-promoted literature and amateur writing was among the most distinctive traits of worker-peasant-soldier literature during the Mao era, and bespeaks of the continued necessity to mix working-class subjects, grounded on political perspectives considered to be proletarian (the *about what* of the criteria illustrated in the opening of the chapter), and the authorship of individuals who truly came from the class itself.

In critical scholarship, both in China and abroad, worker-peasant-soldier literature is faced with a problem of literariness. More precisely, its literary value is strongly disputed, dwarfed by propaganda and sloganeering. Several comparatively sympathetic commentators have likewise noted the structural limits of this configuration, observing for instance, like Wang Ban does, that “the insistence on the relation of art to politics, especially state policy agendas, tended to take on a dogmatic, arbitrary ring, and art was frequently reduced to a mere function of party policy.”<sup>72</sup> Yet, its proclaimed intention to reflect the reality of society, the attempt to do so from a proletarian point of view, its employment of folk forms and styles, and its promotion of cultural creation on the part of ordinary masses compel us to take worker-peasant-soldier literature seriously, and to consider it as a step in the development of the crucial issues of literary theory and practice (authorship, readership, form, content) debated since the “proletarian episode” of the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, the “idealised realism, i.e. the idealised description of reality conducted according to the needs of the worker-peasant-soldier classes” (理想化现实主义, 即按照工农兵阶级的要求对生活作理想化的描写),<sup>73</sup> exposes the influence of the combination of socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism that prevailed in Maoist literary thought, although the tension between a faithful

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<sup>71</sup> Iovene and Picerni, “Chinese Workers’ Literature.”

<sup>72</sup> Wang Ban, “Socialist Realism,” 107.

<sup>73</sup> Liu Jiang, “Shijie geju zhong de Zhongguo gongnongbing wenxue,” 104.

representation of reality and the need to guide readers' political elevation was there way before worker-peasant-soldier literature (as a matter of fact, Mao in the "Talks" also stressed that readers had to be entertained and feel relieved while enjoying these works of literature). Furthermore, what usually goes unnoticed in scholarly inquiries is the content of literary discussions that were carried out during the period, including a heated debate around questions of aesthetics between 1956 and 1963. The profound rethinking of aesthetic ideology crucially subverted taken-for-granted notions around pure vis-à-vis affected arts. In this sense, worker-peasant-soldier literature condensed four decades of fundamental literary discussions. It incorporated the didactic and utilitarian function attributed to literature by the most militant strains of May Fourth, which was then twisted in a bureaucratic way, curtailed in its freedom of innovation and experimentation (in passing, these were the very limitations that prevented the aforementioned aesthetic debates to develop in full), and, in this sense, much more akin to the Confucian tradition of moral education through intangible forms than its proponents would care to admit.

The Reform and Opening Up policy inaugurated in December 1978 and Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 speech at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists in October 1979 led to a relative liberalisation of literary creation. The privatisation of the publishing industry in the 1990s did the rest. Such a liberalisation, however, should not be understood as entirely free from political considerations, even less by market dynamics. One of the implications of the artistic autonomy proclaimed by Deng was the explicit refusal of "politicised" literature and art, as well as a shift to aesthetic criteria that, while highly valuing adherence to the "era" (*shidai* 时代) as a sort of fidelity towards a politically-determined *Zeitgeist*, discouraged social commitment. This shift constitutes also the basis of the academic reception of post-1980s workers' literature as discussed in the next chapter. What China's transition to capitalism terminated was half a century of experimentations and discussions around the possibility of a proletarian literature and aesthetics (beyond its taxonomic usages), unravelling the relations between authorship, readership, subject matter and

perspective. This process, although ultimately intruded and curtailed by political power, introduced questions that are found again in the production and reception of workers' literature after the 1980s.

This outline of the evolution of workers' literature in China, including when the term came to identify a specific genre with political connotations rather than the literary output of individuals doing factory labour, demonstrates that there is a rich tradition of workers' writing that needs to be taken into account when discussing its more contemporary manifestations. In addition, it also points to the relevance of the criteria and categories illustrated in the opening section. The development of workers' literature clearly progressed along lines determined by such crucial questions as by what subjects it should be produced, for what audience, and about what (with which style). The novel necessity to reflect workers' lives in a faithful way, or in a militantly imaginative way (as it was the case with revolutionary romanticism and socialist realism), objectively bridges the aesthetic issues around workers' literature to the previous intellectual activities of writers emerged from the New Culture Movement, in particular for what concerns their handling of the category of truth, *zhen*, and its relation with *mei*, beauty—the dyad of social relevance and artistic quality. The various ways through which these two categories were connected or disconnected were not only up to writers themselves, but actually responded to prevailing or conflicting political demands. As we have seen, workers' literature was subject to shifting expectations, from faithfully representing the lives of labourers to correctly conveying a political truth.

The political context was what determined the difference between workers' literature as description, i.e. the literary output of individuals classifiable as workers, and prescription, i.e. a literature based on certain political and aesthetic assumptions. This shows why several actors beyond writers themselves need to be taken into account and how they influence the way art is produced, or constitute, to borrow Eagleton's definition again, a specific mode of production. The interplay of such forces provided an answer, or more precisely many answers, to the question "Can the worker write?"

*Chapter Two.*  
*A History of Post-1980s Workers' Literature and Its Controversies*

This chapter presents an overview of the existing literature reflecting the principal debates that have unfolded inside and outside Chinese-language academia for what concerns the incarnations of workers' literature from the 1980s onward. The main feature of the period, as far as the social configuration of China's labour was concerned, was the appearance of the immense social group of rural–urban migrant workers, which came to constitute a large part of the country's workforce alongside traditional factory workers. This change in material relations has in turn generated profound changes in the literary expression of the working class. In particular, commentators and practitioners do not seem to agree on whether post-socialist workers' literature, particularly migrant workers', is linked to the previous experience of proletarian and worker-peasant-soldier narratives. The chapter will first approach this problem, and then move to methodological issues that arise from the classification of the trend, once again involving authorship, readership and subject-matter in the definition of the criteria according to which migrant workers' literature can be approached as a distinct "genre." Finally, the chapter will address some of the main polemics that have divided scholars and commentators in the discussion on migrant workers' literature, particularly about the apparent contradiction between its high social value and low artistic quality, and in connection with this, the poet's social responsibility and engagement.

It should be noted that the large part of the commentary concentrates on poetry specifically, owing to the predominance of the genre with respect to others in migrant workers' cultural production. However, the fundamental questions addressed for what concerns poetry are generally valid also for prose, fictional and nonfictional alike. For this reason, poetry and prose will not be discussed separately, and passages on poetry will be read as a more general discussion on the

literature as a whole. More specific aspects of forms and genres will be addressed in the following chapters. In addition, as it will be elaborated further on, the chapter, like the whole thesis, approaches migrant workers' literature not as a distinct genre but as an integral part of post-1980s workers' literature in China, which means that at times *migrant workers' literature* and *workers' literature* will be used interchangeably for what concerns the period after the 1980s, except when it will be necessary to clearly distinguish the two, especially in citing or discussing other commentators.

By outlining the aforementioned issues, the chapter hopes to provide a fairly comprehensive summary of the reception of migrant workers' poetry in the Chinese academia, provide a sense of the existing scholarship and the main aspects that have aroused its interest, and, perhaps most importantly, approach the controversies with the purpose of uncovering the larger historical, social and cultural questions inextricably connected to them.

## **2.1. Approaches of historical taxonomy and periodisation**

The history of post-1980s workers' literature is inseparable from the epochal vicissitudes of China's working class following the start of the Reform period in December 1978. The development plan of the Deng Xiaoping group prioritised the industrialisation of the southern coastal areas that could benefit from their proximity to Hong Kong in terms of investments and transactions. In 1980, Shenzhen was inaugurated as China's first Special Economic Zone (*jingji tequ* 经济特区), where flexible entrepreneurial and fiscal policies would be put in place to attract foreign capital. Such policies included fiscal incentives, greater autonomy from muddled bureaucratic procedures, the possibility to establish joint ventures with Chinese enterprises, and a freer rein to the market compared to the limitations of the state capitalism that was being established in the rest of the country. Meanwhile, de-collectivisation and the establishment of the household

responsibility system in the countryside turned rural areas into a seemingly unlimited reservoir of cheap labour-force, which was increasingly influenced by the growing attractive power of cities and moved there in search for work. They have been called the floating population, *liudong renkou* 流动人口, or farmer-workers, *nongmingong* 农民工. Not all joined the legions of factory labourers, vast numbers actually ended up in construction sites, others entered sectors such as services (especially waiters), entertainment, security, public cleaning, etc., and not a few engrossed the numbers of the urban lumpenproletariat and petty criminals. What structurally determines migrants' subaltern position is the "household registration system," or *hukou* 户口. Possession of an urban *hukou* is indispensable to access social services, including healthcare and education. However, the difficulty or sheer impossibility to obtain an urban *hukou* for the large majority of rural migrants has turned them into a highly unstable, conveniently cheap and organisationally weak workforce.

The word *dagong* 打工 is the most striking linguistic manifestation of the liberalisation of labour. It is generally used to refer to migrant workers, but, as noticed by Pun Ngai, the verb "simply means 'working for the boss,' a term that powerfully connotes the commodification of labour,"<sup>1</sup> accentuating its floating and precarious nature. *Migrant worker*, then, as *dagong* is usually transferred into English, is only a descriptive translation, as *precarious labourer* would also be (these are the two main English terms I will be using throughout the dissertation when referring to *dagong*).<sup>2</sup> Van Crevel has put forward the Australian colloquialism *battler*, whose meaning is as close as it gets to the original word, as a viable alternative which is "colloquial, concise, pejorative

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<sup>1</sup> Pun Ngai, *Made in China*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> The opacity of the term *dagong* is not helpful in this regard. As we have seen, it literally means "doing a job," implicitly for a boss. Between 2020 and 2021, *dagongren* 打工人 became a buzzword on the internet, and several individuals not ascribable to migrant workers also took up the term for themselves in order to denounce harsh working conditions.

yet proud.”<sup>3</sup> However translated, *dagong* indicates a general precarisation of labour, that went hand-in-hand with the gradual erosion of the old social safety net built around the socialist *danwei* 单位, or work unit. Factory-based welfare was strongly reduced with the wave of privatisations in the 1990s and the dismantlement of gargantuan state-owned enterprises (SOE), causing massive layoffs and creating a more unfavourable relationship of forces for the working class. One of the major phenomena that took place with the restructuring of employment relations was what Pun Ngai and Chris Smith have characterised as the “dormitory labour regime,” where private life is organised as an extension of the working time and functional to the latter.<sup>4</sup> In general, the new factory regime enforced in the “workshop of the world” was based, according to Guo Yuhua 郭于华 and Huang Binhuan 黄斌欢, on high labour intensity, workers’ atomisation within the workplace and in society, and increased militarisation.<sup>5</sup>

*Dagong* also came to denote a literary phenomenon connected to migrant workers, especially among those who had reached the newly-industrialised areas of the Pearl River Delta, around the cities of Shenzhen and Dongguan in Guangdong province. Although it would be arduous to identify exactly when migrant workers began to write prose and poetry in low-level local magazines and factory outlets, 1984 is conventionally accepted as a more precise starting date. In that year, *Tequ wenxue* 特区文学 (*Special Zone Literature*), a journal specifically addressing new forms of local cultural expressions, published “Shenye, haibian you yi ge ren” 深夜，海边有一个人 (Deep in the Night, There’s Someone by the Sea), a short story by Lin Jian 林坚, which was followed by other

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<sup>3</sup> Van Crevel, “The Cultural Translation,” 246. While I appreciate van Crevel’s choice, the reason why I decided to stick to *migrant workers*’ is extremely practical, as it helps me stress the link with the working class in the present time as well as with its cultural productions through history.

<sup>4</sup> Pun Ngai and Chris Smith, “The Dormitory Labor Regime in China,” 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Guo Yuhua and Huang Binhuan, “Shijie gongchang de ‘Zhongguo tese,’” 2014.



works whose authors were highlighted as “temporary workers” (*linshigong* 临时工).<sup>6</sup> It was not a flash in the pan. Stories and poems by Lin Jian himself as well as increasing numbers of migrant workers started attracting a certain attention from local circles, evidenced by a growing number of journals that called on or opened dedicated columns for migrant authors, such as the prestigious *Huacheng* 花城 (*Flower City*) bi-monthly, and the locally-distributed *Guangzhou wenxue* 广州文学 (*Guangzhou Literature*) and *Foshan wenyi* 佛山文艺 (*Foshan Literature and Art*). A turn came in 1988, when Shenzhen’s Bao’an District Bureau of Culture started a journal explicitly addressed to migrant workers, *Dapengwan* 大鹏湾 (*Dapeng Bay*). Here is where some of those that have been framed in relevant scholarship as a sort of founding texts for migrant workers’ literature were first published, such as Lin Jian’s “Bieren de chengshi” 别人的城市 (*City of Others*), that appeared in *Huacheng* in 1990, and Zhang Weiming’s 张伟明 “Xia yi zhan” 下一站 (*Next Stop*), carried by *Dapengwan* in 1989. Stories published during that period were thematically diverse, ranging from accounts of urban inequality and dramatic displacement to success stories not so different from the media representations of adventurous migrants in the city, that workers’ “self-representations” are often supposed to counterbalance with more realistic stories.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, support from local institutions was instrumental in the early spreading of this new literary configuration, and has continued to play a crucial role ever since. Especially in the case of the Pearl River Delta, sponsoring migrant worker authors also meant promoting a local cultural trademark that could add a touch of culture to an area under a heavy economic impact. It is notable that this was done exactly by severing the ties between migrant workers’ productions and the previous tradition of workers’ literature, but we will return on this point shortly. Support from local institutions and officials is showcased by Yang Honghai 杨宏海, who served through the 1990s as

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<sup>6</sup> Huang, Shen and Zhou, “Xu,” 5.

<sup>7</sup> Dooling, “Representing Dagongmei.”

the director of the Literature and Art Theory Research Office of the Shenzhen Municipality's Cultural Commission, as well as a leading official of the Research Centre on Special Zone Culture, a body he had contributed to setting up. The generally-acclaimed accomplishments of Yang Honghai's include establishing migrant workers' literature as a distinct, unique phenomenon, promoting authors' visibility (also by recommending their publications on important outlets), and attracting the attention of the academic world by participating in or hosting national-level symposia, and editing anthologies of migrant worker authors himself.<sup>8</sup> Yang Honghai is also credited with coining the term *dagong literature* as early as 1985, although he insists of having done so only in his 1991 article "Dagong shijie yu dagong wenxue" 打工世界与打工文学 (Migrant Workers' World and Migrant Workers' Literature), suggesting that the term actually required some time to establish itself, or that it was in use way before he adopted it.<sup>9</sup> In passing, Yang Honghai also considers the "doggerels" (顺口溜) created and spread orally by migrant workers in the early 1980s as the first incarnation of a *dagong* literature still in its budding stage.<sup>10</sup> Part of Yang Honghai's work consisted in gathering authors and works to produce collections and anthologies that could give a sense of what was coalescing into a distinct literary phenomenon—and that Yang and Shenzhen's cultural authorities had an interest in presenting as such. One of the first was the "*dagong* literature book series" (打工文学系列丛书) edited by him, together with Song Cheng 宋城, in 1992 for Huatian chubanshe, followed in 2000 by a thick anthology called *Dagong shijie* 打工世界: 青春的涌动 (*Migrant Workers' World: The Surge of Youth*), which included a substantial range of genres and critical articles.

What emerged was a vibrant cultural scene among migrant workers of the Pearl River Delta, and the publication of these authors and anthologies helped spreading it off province, attracting

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<sup>8</sup> Sun Wanning, "Poetry of Labour," 185–186; van Crevel, "The Cultural Translation," 267–268.

<sup>9</sup> Yang Honghai, "'Dagong wenxue' de lishi jiyi," 44.

<sup>10</sup> Yang Honghai, "Wenhua shijie zhong de Guangdong 'dagong wenxue.'"

increasing attention from scholars and intellectuals. For instance, another important work in the politics of promotion of *dagong* literature was *Qinchun yizhan* 青春驿站 (*Station Youth*) by Anzi, carried first by *Shenzhen tequ bao* 深圳特区报 (*Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*) and then relaunched by the *Wen Hui Bao* 文汇报, the prestigious Shanghai magazine, in 1991. This outer visibility was boosted as migrant worker authors operating in Guangdong started to obtain important literary prizes at local or national level. Xie Xiangnan 谢湘南 and Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 are probably the most evident examples. Both poets, the first obtained prizes and managed to publish on *Shikan* 诗刊 (*Poetry*), the nation's flagship poetry journal, in the mid-1990s, while the latter was first noticed by local cultural officials and then rose to fame after winning the non-plus-ultra People's Literature Prize (*Renmin wenxue jiang* 人民文学奖) in 2007 with her essay "Tie" 铁 (Iron). In 2010 it was the novelist Wang Shiyue 王十月 who won the Lu Xun Prize. Although all of them had to count primarily on their talent to emerge, they also intercepted local cultural bodies' politics oriented at establishing *dagong* literature as a peculiar literary product of Guangdong, which was helpful in terms of promotion and funds. Their success allowed them to eventually leave manual labour and move to cultural jobs. Zheng Xiaoqiong in particular has continued to be a sort of "poster girl" for migrant workers' poetry, contributing in a significant way to bolster its visibility among specialists and non-specialists alike, and also inspiring a considerable amount of scholarship also outside of China.<sup>11</sup> Another stimulus, albeit tragic, came from Xu Lizhi 许立志, a young Foxconn worker and prolific poet, whose suicide in September 2014 won migrant workers' poetry a significant, although temporary, limelight.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, it was also a demonstration of the

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<sup>11</sup> Haomin Gong, "Towards a New Leftist Ecocriticism," "Gender, Class, and Capital;" "Jaguścik, "The Woman Attempting to Disrupt the Ritual"" and "Intersections of Class, Gender and Environmental Concern;" van Crevel, "No One in Control?"; Zhou Xiaojin, *Migrant Ecologies*.

<sup>12</sup> Leng Shuang, "'Dagong shige' de meixue zhengyi," 20.

extent to which migrant worker authors' lives are influenced by an interplay of factors and actors, where institutional recognition plays a vital role in offering ways out of the shopfloor.

A landmark moment in the development of migrant-worker literature was the founding of *Dagong shiren* 打工诗人 (*Migrant Worker Poet*) in May 2001, the first journal dedicated to migrant workers' poetry to be opened by migrant worker poets themselves. The idea came to a group of poets, including Xu Qiang 许强, Luo Deyuan 罗德远, Xu Fei 徐非 and Ren Mingyou 任明友, who had made a name of themselves publishing poetry in Guangdong journals during the previous decade. The relevance of the event should not be underestimated, at least for two reasons. On the one hand, poetry has always been the most widespread genre of migrant workers' literature, and *Dagong shiren* presented itself as “a structural, dedicated and sustained effort to survey and publicise battlers poetry,” in the words of van Crevel<sup>13</sup> (not incidentally, most of the best-known migrant worker poets, including the aforementioned Zheng Xiaoqiong, saw their pieces published in *Dagong shiren*). But most importantly, the need to have a journal entirely dedicated to migrant workers' poetry—and run by migrant worker poets themselves—signalled a maturation on the part of practitioners themselves, who evidently felt the need to have a recognisable and autonomous space to share the poetry, create connections and build the related discourse. Precisely in terms of discourse, i.e. making sense of what migrant workers' poetry meant to its very authors, the first issue of *Dagong shiren* carried a sort of “manifesto” penned by Luo Deyuan:

我们的宣言：

打工诗人：一个特殊时代的歌者；

打工诗歌：与命运抗争的一面旗帜！

我们的心愿：

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<sup>13</sup> Van Crevel, “The Cultural Translation,” 259.

用苦难的青春写下真实与梦想，  
为我们的漂泊的人生作证！

our proclamation:

migrant worker poet: an extraordinary bard of the era;  
migrant worker poet: a banner in the struggle with fate!

our wish:

write down reality and dreams with our suffering youth,  
be of testimony to our floating lives!

The declaration is indicative of the journal's conception of poetry as a means to engage with reality, and in particular to document the ordeals of the social group it originates from. It is also, in this sense, a form of metatext to critically reflect on what ways the instrument serves its practitioners, without leaving the task just to the scholars "above." In this respect, although *Dagong shiren* was considered a publication "for internal exchange" (*neibu jiaoliu* 内部交流), with the formula used to denote unofficial publications that seek to evade legal problems of many sorts (selling rights included), it was not completely separate from the cultural establishment. In fact, while the poetry columns were reserved for migrant worker poets, its fourth and last page was dedicated to criticism and it often carried pieces by academicians.

The cooperation that brought out *Dagong shiren* remained productive over the years—the journal itself was discontinued in 2011, before being reborn as *Dagong shige* 打工诗歌 (*Migrant Workers' Poetry*), an irregular publication. Another fruit of this cooperation was *1985–2005 nian Zhongguo dagong shige jingxuan* 1985-2005 年中国打工诗歌精选 (*The Best of Chinese Migrant Workers' Poetry, 1985–2005*), an anthology published in 2007, whose function in the development of migrant-worker poetry can be considered historic. Edited by Xu Qiang, Luo Deyuan and Chen

Zhongcun 陈忠村, it included three dozen poets, about a hundred pages of critical essays, and a chronology of major events (in the form of a “dossier,” *dang'an* 档案) in the history of migrant workers’ poetry. The line-up is impressive, and it really gives a sense of the extremely rich and diverse array of styles and sensibilities that had come forming under the overarching name of “*dagong* poetry” over the previous two decades. Other similar selections have been published on a yearly basis, but the 2007 anthology remains historic not only for being the first of its kind, but because it is part of the attempt carried forward by Xu Qiang and the others to systematically group together what had been produced by migrant worker poets like themselves up until that moment. The anthology, not unlike *Dagong shiren*, was therefore also a community-making practice, not only by putting all the authors in the same place, but also reflecting diachronically on the steps that gradually brought scattered individualities to form up what they were now calling *dagong* poetry.

Finally, 2015 saw the publication of another crucial anthology, edited by the poet Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇, titled *Wo de shipian. Dangdai gongren shidian* 我的诗篇——当代工人诗典 (*My Verses. Contemporary Workers’ Poetry*). It is a bulky collection, with a total of 62 authors, preceded by a 60-odd-page introduction by Qin himself. The appendices include a mini-anthology of workers’ poetry from 1949 to 1976, and a valuable 81-page-long transcript of a workshop on workers’ poetry convened by Qin himself and the Peking University-based scholar (and practitioner) of poetry Jiang Tao 姜涛 in Picun on 2 February 2015. As observed by van Crevel, *Wo de shipian* presents at least two peculiarities. First, migrant worker poets are only some of the names that can be found in the table of contents, which makes its historical reach more wide-ranging. Second, it was associated to a multimedia project that also included a documentary film by Qin and Wu Feiyue 吴飞跃 featuring a selection of the poets from the anthology. Furthermore, the book’s publication was followed by a series of launch events or related symposia, a stunningly rapid (but partial) English translation (with

the title *Iron Moon*), giving it unprecedented visibility, also on an international plane.<sup>14</sup> It is probably not too far-fetched to assume that *Wo de shipian* was actually meant as part of an internationalisation of Chinese workers' poetry. Shortly thereafter, Yang Lian 杨炼, a famous avant-garde poet in good terms with Qin Xiaoyu and who had associated himself with the *Wo de shipian* project (also chairing the reading that appears in the film, and taking part in the workshop), edited the bilingual edition of *A Massively Single Number*, where he collected the finalist poets of the 2014 Artsbj.com International Chinese Poetry Prize, with migrant worker Guo Jinniu 郭金牛 at the centre of the stage. Of course these operations cannot be underestimated, not only for the capital importance of English translations in spreading knowledge of Chinese migrant workers' poetry to non-Sinophone readers, but also because it once again shows the importance of mediators (in this case, "patrons" such as Qin Xiaoyu and Yang Lian) in fostering recognition(s). But even more crucially to our purposes, *Wo de shipian* called these poets *gongren*, not *dagong*, and in general it adopted a much more far-reaching perspective that compels us to rethink the historical and social boundaries of *dagong*/migrant workers' literature.

The association or disassociation of *dagong* literature with what came before as workers' literature (*gongren wenxue*) is not obvious, but it is nevertheless a crucial question. Can *dagong* and workers'/*gongren* literatures be ascribed to the same cultural current, or are the historical and internal differences so profound that the two should be regarded as entirely distinct genres? The question evidently crosses several planes, touching the authors' social identity, the historical context, (a)political contents, themes, styles. And while it is arguably easier to circumscribe *dagong* literature to a certain time and space, the same can be also done to "workers' literature" as well, if one considers it not as a merely descriptive term—literature produced by individuals who are identified as workers—applicable locally as well as globally, but as a more taxonomically rigid definition for a precise literary moment—a Chinese, 20th-century *gongren wenxue* (akin for

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<sup>14</sup> Van Crevel, "The Cultural Translation," 264–265.

example to revolutionary literature or left-wing literature). This purely academic perspective should restrict *gongren wenxue* to the literary experience of workers in the conditions of the socialist cultural system from 1949 to 1976, whereas *dagong wenxue* would be an entirely distinct phenomenon originating from the new situation of the Reform era. I say “purely academic” because this perspective meets a scholarly urge to categorise and find the founding properties of each literary mo(ve)ment, but risks missing the historical links that bind them together. Relevant differences are also there of course, starting with the fact that post-1980s workers’ literature has been a bottom-up process (despite its entanglements with power), as opposed to its predecessor’s rooting in the ideological and cultural agenda of revolutionary intellectuals and the CCP.

As noted above, migrant workers’ literature was explicitly promoted as a distinct cultural phenomenon of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, and later expanded to include the industrial province of Guangdong in general. In this interpretation, any link with the previous experience of workers’ literature was conspicuously absent, and for a tangible motivation. Local cultural bodies were interested in pairing the economic development with a culture they could claim as typically local, but simultaneously in line with “the era” and the changes brought about by industrialisation, market reforms, and globalisation. The operation was seemingly successful, and it was perfectly expressed by the novelist Chen Guokai’s 陈国凯 words of surprise in 1993: “Who would have thought that in a land of squandering money like the Special Zone, there would still be people who wanted to talk about literature” (特区一掷千金之地，居然还有人谈文学).<sup>15</sup> Yang Honghai himself reflected this approach as he saluted *dagong* literature as a feature of the south, one among others, whose main trait is a “pioneering nature” (先导性), understood as adherence to the Reform-era *Zeitgeist*, and the hybridisation of culture and economy, refined and vulgar, local and global,<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Chen Guokai, “Zhushi jiaoxia zhe pian retu,” 701.

<sup>16</sup> Yang Honghai, “Yi Deng Xiaoping wenyi lilun yanjiu tequ wenhua.”



essentially mirroring the characteristics of the SEZs. Consequently, he described it in the following terms:

一种悄悄崛起的文学现象，“打工文学”是继南国“知青文学”、“都市文学”、“军旅文学”之后，更具有南方特色、影响更广、规模更大的新的文学景观[。]

A literary phenomenon that has suddenly but quietly appeared on the horizon, ‘migrant workers’ literature’ is a new literary landscape that continues the tradition of the ‘sent-down-youth’, ‘urban’ and ‘military literatures’ of the south, with even more pronounced southern characteristics, an even larger influence, and a vaster scope.<sup>17</sup>

For him, *dagong* literature embodied a third type of cultural “self-confidence” (Yang Honghai uses the term *Shenzheshi* “*xiaosa*” 深圳式 “潇洒”, “Shenzhen-type *xiaosa*” for Shenzhen writers throughout the 1980s. *Xiaosa* is a very difficult word to translate, but indicates a form of strong self-confidence, making an individual able to stand for their views, while simultaneously at ease about it. After a first “ideal” (理想) attitude characterised by the daring and creative spirit of the early days of the SEZ, and a second “relaxed” (轻松) fashion where everything seemed within a hand’s reach, migrant workers’ literature was finally a third phase described as “heavy” (沉重), which provided a more complete social picture of the SEZ, where the hardships faced by many of its new inhabitants would be manifest. Far from contradicting the spirit of the SEZ itself, migrant workers’ literature was “closer to life, and better equipped with the spiritual connotations of Special Zone culture under the conditions of the commodity economy” (更贴近生活, 更具有商品经济条件下特区文化精神的内涵).<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, over time Yang Honghai expanded this notion,

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<sup>17</sup> Yang Honghai, “Dagong shijie yu dagong wenxue,” 710.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 713.

conceding that *dagong* literature was mainly located in the coastal cities of the south (not only Shenzhen),<sup>19</sup> or even dropping the southern exclusivity altogether, admitting that it was a nationwide phenomenon<sup>20</sup> (although, curiously, this was not a zooming-out operation that progressed with time, as Yang Honghai appears to have enlarged and restricted the scope multiple times during his career).

Evidently though, the main characteristic of migrant workers' literature was not, for Yang, the fact that it inherited or reproduced a form of representation of and by the working class, but how it situated itself in the distinct cultural scene of southern China. In fact, Yang was not the only one to associate migrant workers' literature with the literary production by writers who were sent down to the countryside as "educated youth" during the Cultural Revolution, but we will return to this point later on. Undoubtedly, this insistence on the "southern" character of the new literary phenomenon is partly foregrounded by the endemic cultural rivalry that has historically opposed the northern and southern halves of China, but might also find a justification in the heavy presence of the "south" in much of migrant workers' prose and poetry, to the point that it has become one of its basic aesthetic components. The word *dagong* itself originating from the Cantonese (with the meaning, as we have seen, of "working for a boss") also brings gist to the southern mill. As a matter of fact, the southern *origin* of migrant workers' literature is hardly disputable, but it does not make it a wholly, exclusively, or even predominantly southern phenomenon. Taxonomic conventions can be useful, but they should not be adopted unconditionally.

On the contrary, Qin Xiaoyu believes that there is a connection between migrant worker authors of the present day and their antecedents. In his voluminous preface to *Wo de shipian*, he avoids using the term *dagong*, although he refers to "peasant-worker poets" (*nongmingong shiren* 农民工诗人), which essentially has the same meaning. He makes it clear that for him all these

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<sup>19</sup> Yang Honghai, "Wenhua shiye zhong de Guangdong 'dagong wenxue.'"

<sup>20</sup> Yang Honghai, "Miandui jingcai de dagong shijie," 722.

authors can be grouped under “workers’ poetry” (*gongren shige*), and that those who Yang Honghai (and much of the commentary, to be fair) would call *dagong* are just an incarnation of workers’ poetry influenced by the change of the internal composition of the working class, with the appearance of a vast mobile industrial reserve army. Qin enumerates three main founding traits that define workers’ poetry as an organic whole, which have remained largely unchanged throughout its history. First, it is vested with historical significance, based on its testimonial roles for social realities otherwise obscured. Second, it carries on the “enlightening” (*qimeng* 启蒙) role of literature, performed this time by a majority, rather than an intellectual minority (of course this presupposes that worker poets are understood as interpreters of the working class as a whole). Third, it exposes the stamp of social identity on literary creation and the way it influences the aesthetic production of a “social self” (*shehuixing ziwo* 社会性自我), which is the main artistic achievement of workers’ poetry.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, Qin also identifies important differences, but attributes them more to historical factors than to the emergence of a wholly new genre as *dagong* poetry would be. In his view, Chinese workers’ poetry progressed along four stages. The first starts in 1949, taking into account the fact that most of the proletarian literature produced before the PRC was actually the work of intellectuals, and authentic writings by workers themselves were very rare (see chapter One). In Qin’s view, socialist-era poetry displayed a form of “labourist” (劳动主义) aesthetics that embellished labour and extolled the deeds of on-duty workers, heavily romanticising its characters and settings.<sup>22</sup> It was essentially an instrument of propaganda and state ideology, but that did not prevent individual authors from displaying a sense of individual creativity and a not-so-predictable relation between the self and the collective, which Qin sees particularly epitomised by the Great Leap Forward era poet Shen Che’s 沈澈 attempt to balance adherence to official themes and forms

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<sup>21</sup> Qin Xiaoyu, “Zai qi suo chuangzao de shijie zhong,” 1–3

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, 8–9.

with and the expression of personal emotions, the political conscious and the private unconscious.<sup>23</sup> We then find a post-Cultural Revolution phase populated by unexpected “worker poets,” such as Shu Ting 舒婷, Liang Xiaobin 梁小斌 and Yu Jian 于坚, who were sent-down youths working in factories during the Cultural Revolution, and therefore were able to poetically express the life of the workshop. Although for them the factory was mostly an environment for poetic inspiration about more spiritual themes, for Qin their actual participation in industrial labour for a certain period qualifies them as worker poets, not to mention that they set a more colloquial style as the main register of workers’ poetry against the fixed form of the Mao era.<sup>24</sup> The next two stages are somewhat coeval, or eventually cross into each other. One was the poetry by laid-off workers of the SOEs, well represented by Shengzi 绳子, filled with the decline of the socialist factory, the loss of any collective sense, but still with a strong attachment to the nobility of factory and labour. It is globalisation seen from the point of view of workers.<sup>25</sup> Then there has been the poetry by migrant workers, who bring in new themes such as the process of entering the cities and the resultant discrimination, the nostalgia for an idealised countryside, and the contradictory dynamics of adapting to an “alien” living and working environment. Theirs is, above all, a poetics of trauma (创伤写作), physical and spiritual alike.<sup>26</sup>

Another one who traces an evolution in workers’ poetry similar to Qin’s schematisation is Wu Ji 吴季. A sharp critic, prolific translator, and poet himself, Wu Ji founded the Workers’ Poetry Alliance (*Gongren shige lianmeng* 工人诗歌联盟) together with Shengzi in 2005. They also started a voluminous publication, *Gongren shige* 工人诗歌 (*Workers’ Poetry*), which included a rich (and careful) selection of poets, a dozen pages of prose, and a section dedicated to commentary, and

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 14–15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 50.

foreign translations (mostly from South Korea). The journal never claimed nor planned any periodicity, but it also never achieved any. So far, it has published only three book-length issues, in 2007, 2009 and 2018. However, in addition to having a lively online community, its approach—and the kind of poetry it publishes—is quite unique and noteworthy. *Gongren shige* is adamant about the fact that workers’ poetry should be produced by workers for workers, and that this poetry is meaningless unless it aims at uplifting workers’ class consciousness. In this sense, the selection is very severe, since it must observe this specification in fact or intention. The critique is no less severe, most of which is carried out by Wu Ji himself with a plain and stern style.

In his 2015 essay, “Zhongguo gongren shige de bainian cangsan” 中国工人诗歌的百年沧桑 (A Century of Vicissitudes in Chinese Workers’ Poetry), Wu Ji, like Qin Xiaoyu, also counts Liang Xiaobin and Yu Jian among “worker poets.” Although their factory-themed production was ambiguous and full of contradictions, it represented the fall of the ruling ideology and a new exploration of reality, the self, and the other, but precisely for this reason, it ended up being overly individualistic, losing sight of class. Throughout, Wu Ji is extremely rigorous in his assessment of the history of workers’ poetry. He holds there was no genuine workers’ poetry in the 1920s–1940s (with individual exceptions, such as Yin Fu 殷夫), due to the control of party-minded intellectuals, and the abundance of slogans and catchphrases. True embryos of proletarian poetry were to be found in oral *geyao* 歌谣 (“ballads”), which achieved the conflation of author and reader into one individual, and that were collected in a systematic way only after 1949. In fact, workers’ poetry in the early decades of the PRC was likewise unsatisfactory to Wu Ji, since it was permeated by a “sense of responsibility” (责任感) to new state prescriptions—read, adherence to the new regime—instead of authentic workers’ control. Not incidentally, Wu Ji subscribes to the worker poet Mo Mo’s 默默 statement that “There’s always been very little true proletarian poetry, and even less in

the Chinese poetry scene” (真正的无产阶级诗歌一直很少，在中国诗坛更少).<sup>27</sup> By contrast, according to Wu Ji, Mo Mo (together with others, including the *Gongren shige* regular Chen Ge 沉戈) is an outstanding representative of a new generation of worker poets that emerged after the 1980s, whose poetry was filled with the anger at and the sense of loss for a condition of ostensible liberation and empowerment that continued to (re)produce exploitation and alienation. Overall, Wu Ji remains very critical, in a militant way, to expose aspects where he finds worker poets excessively pessimistic or thwarted by illusions.

In this sense, Wu Ji also adopts a historical framework that situates migrant workers’ poetry within the more general definition of workers’ poetry. Rather, his criticism is precisely levelled against attempts to frame *dagong* poetry as a purely literary category. He distinguishes between two uses of the term: “In a larger sense, ‘*dagong* poets’ can refer to poets found among the totality of migrant workers, but in the narrow sense it only refers to those poets who have gathered around this ‘trademark’” (广义的‘打工诗人’可以指全体打工者当中的诗人，狭义的‘打工诗人’则仅指围绕着这个‘品牌’聚集起来的那些诗人).<sup>28</sup> While he is not opposed to the former use, having employed it himself in a neutral way to refer to the poetry written by migrant workers (after all, the first issue of *Gongren shige* explicitly states that workers in its definition include every person who *dagong*-s),<sup>29</sup> he understands the latter as a hoax. Some of its icons, like Anzi, a “big boss with a skill at brainwashing” (这位洗脑有术的大老板),<sup>30</sup> promote individuality and mislead workers into believing in the possibility to emancipate themselves through writing. For Wu Ji, the capital error of the “narrow-sense” *dagong* literature proponents consist in aspiring to get on an equal ground with middle-class intellectuals, and therefore to chase after “elevated” forms of

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Wu Ji, “Zhongguo gongren shige,” 197.

<sup>28</sup> Wu Ji, “Zhongguo gongren shige,” 200.

<sup>29</sup> Wu Ji, “Dagong shige chuangzao tan.”

<sup>30</sup> Wu Ji, “Zhongguo gongren shige,” 200.

writing by adopting the dominant aesthetic conventions (i.e. the artistic sense of the ruling class) instead of creating their own. In particular, he takes odds with Liu Dongwu 柳冬妩, a prominent critic and former worker poet himself (who will reappear later in the chapter), for uncritically taking up the language and limited vision of academia: “By dividing ‘*dagong* poetry’ into ‘good’ and ‘bad poetry’ (instead of ‘good *dagong* poetry’ and ‘bad *dagong* poetry’), Liu Dongwu writes off the ‘*dagong*,’ moving to a strict defence of the positions of [pure] aesthetics” (通过把“打工诗歌”分为“好诗”和“坏诗”（而不是“好的打工诗歌”和“坏的打工诗歌”），柳冬妩就把“打工”两个字抹杀了，严格坚守美学立场去了).<sup>31</sup> All this hinders the fostering of a workers’ poetry that is confident enough to follow its own aesthetic standards and socio-cultural purposes. And while some worker authors may actually be lucky enough to find the exact, fortuitous convergence of external factors for favour their individual success, like Guo Jinniu, who “has just learned a bunch of currently fashionable styles and sprayed them with ‘*dagong* themes’” (只是学得一手当前流行的某类诗风，卖弄到“打工题材”上而已),<sup>32</sup> for others it is just a tragic illusion. Xu Lizhi’s bloody fate is the perfect example of the dead end of a kind of workers’ poetry that gives up its thematic independence in the chase for upper-class recognition.

In the overview so far we have concentrated on examining the connections and disconnections of migrant workers’ literature with the tradition of working-class writing in China. While it is undisputable that the two objectively share a history, this does not mean that things have not changed, and that post-1980s workers’ literature has been immune to the influence of other literary trends. Quite the contrary is true. Precisely the obliteration of previous proletarian culture from public memory and the institutional depoliticisation of *dagong* literature have favoured influxes from the prevailing literary scene. Scholars and critics have generally spotted a debt towards post-

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*: 201.

Cultural Revolution era educated-youth literature (*zhiqing wenxue* 知青文学), at least in terms of themes and style. Tan Yuanzhang 谭远长, for instance, points out how both phenomena were the “accidental” product of “accidental” circumstances, strictly connected to their particular historical moment (the Cultural Revolution, Reform) and produced by a well-defined social group. Thematically, both explore similar elements, such as drifting, estrangement, angst, labour, although an important difference can be identified in authors’ cultural level and position—high in the case of the educated youth, low for migrant workers.<sup>33</sup> And of course, educated-youth literature is actually an overarching term, and authors who fall into this category also belong to other trends, such as root-seeking or scar literatures.

In the case of poetry, it is mainly Obscure poetry, although, as shown in length by van Crevel, critical commentary tend to be divided about the actual relationship entertained by migrant workers’ poetry and avant-garde poetry (itself crossed by disagreements over its own social engagement), while on the level of practice, interactions between migrant worker poets and their avant-garde counterparts tend to occur with high frequency, especially over the monopoly of the right to literary innovation (arguably held by the avant-garde, and contested by migrant workers’ poetry), the relationship between formalism, considered a trait of the avant-garde (especially post-Obscure poetry avant-garde), and social themes, and the level of avant-garde poets’ actual engagement with migrant workers’ poetry (Yang Lian is a case in point).<sup>34</sup> For Liu Dongwu, it is likewise clear that *dagong* poetry was born in the wake of educated-youth/Obscure poetry, and thanks to it, *dagong* poetry could move from a heavily-politicised and party-guided art to a poetics strongly based on the individual.<sup>35</sup> Curiously, this position is not so far from Pozzana’s argument that migrant workers’ poetry inherits Obscure poets’ attempt to carve out an independent poetic space to reaffirm their

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<sup>33</sup> Tan Yuanzhang, “Dagong wenxue yu wenxueshi,” 754–755.

<sup>34</sup> Van Crevel, “The Cultural Translation.”

<sup>35</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Dagong wenxue*, 346.



subjective existence in the distance from state politics,<sup>36</sup> although she would not entirely subscribe to the transfer from collective to individual, which is precisely the main case used by scholars to make the connection between *zhiqing* and *dagong*.

In fact, in most of migrant workers' poetry and prose, themes like displacement, anomie and even labour are interpreted primarily in their inner psychological dimension, and much less in relation with the structural causes of oppression that traditional working-class literature exposed and denounced (as will become clearer in the analysis of specific case studies in part II). However, the difference in perspective, determined above all by the different historical contexts that separate workers' literature before and after the 1980s, with educated-youth poetry as a sort of buffer zone, should not obscure their strong connections. Issues of oppression and alienation arise in both configurations, whether explicitly or implicitly, and crucial questions of socio-literary nature, such as authorship and the relation between the art and society, contribute to bringing them together.

## 2.2. Methodological range and the politics of boundaries

In his English-language introduction to the collection of poems from the Artsbj.com International Chinese Poetry Prize, which included Guo Jinniu, Yang Lian wrote: "When the only ideology left for humanity is money, the only philosophy of life is selfishness, and the only attitude to this world is cynicism, WHO IS NOT A MIGRANT WORKER?"<sup>37</sup> The question was provocative. Its expansion of the semantic contours of *migrant worker* would seem motivated by a sort of upper-class sympathy interested in displacing the "rigid" social and class boundaries of the definition to turn it into an existential term that virtually everyone can partake of. However, it is useful to introduce a much more practical and urgent question: who forms migrant workers' literature? In

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<sup>36</sup> Pozzana, "Poetry."

<sup>37</sup> Yang Lian, "Introduction," 7.

other words, should what we consider (migrant) workers' literature include also authors who are not (migrant) workers themselves?

So far, we have analysed the inception and formation of migrant workers' literature from a historical point of view, particularly placing it within the larger framework of Chinese workers' literature during the 20th and 21st centuries. Now we need to move from the diachronic to the synchronic, and make sense of its scope in a rigorous way. It is a fundamental question of method, since the analysis of this literature inevitably touches upon a conglomeration of historical and personal factors that may vary significantly according to the author's social being.<sup>38</sup> Historically, as Inwood observes, this act of naming is what has “give[n] shape to historical narratives of modern Chinese poetry and give[n] poets a sense of control over their personal and collective literary histories”<sup>39</sup> (the same can be said for prose)—and this is even truer for workers' literature, given its particular socio-political implications. In the last analysis, we are once again confronted with the *vexata quaestio* of whom should workers' literature be *for*, *by*, *about*, with all its historical precedents examined in chapter One. And like we concluded there, approaches in critical scholarship can only be operative and contingent, but hardly definitive.

Also Yang Honghai recognises that there are different and even “conflicting” definitions on the field. For some, *dagong* literature should indicate only works written by *dagong* individuals, while for others, it can also include what is written about them. However, he has never hidden a preference for a description that privileges what is written by actual migrant workers themselves.<sup>40</sup> After the academic debates of the 2000s (that we will encounter below), when the possibility for writers with no personal experience of migrant labour to write “*dagong* literature” was discussed, Yang Honghai, possibly to avoid an excessive enlargement of the boundaries, advanced the

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<sup>38</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Dagong wenxue*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Inwood, “Between License and Responsibility,” 39.

<sup>40</sup> Yang Honghai, “Wenhua shiye zhong de Guangdong ‘dagong wenxue.’”

following definition: “‘Migrant workers’ literature’ is made up of literary works that reflect the conditions of existence and the ideas and emotions of the subaltern labourers, especially rural–urban migrant workers” ( “打工文学” 是反映底层打工民众尤其是农民工生存状态以及思想感情的文学作品，简言之，就是 “打工者写，写打工者” 的文学).<sup>41</sup> Here, then, only qualifies as *dagong* literature what is written *by* and *about* migrant workers (or, to be more precise, *especially* migrant workers, because in theory the *dagong* condition—i.e. the precarious, unstable, often informal “working-for-the-boss” condition—does not presuppose any necessary relation with migrancy, although individuals who *dagong* are overwhelmingly migrants). It goes without saying that others, like Wu Ji, would agree with these criteria, although it is absolutely safe to assume that he would add *for* to the list, given his belief that workers’ literature should serve workers’ enlightenment.

Curiously, it is Liu Dongwu who has come up with a proposal to, so to speak, to save the best of both worlds. As already mentioned above, Liu Dongwu is a fascinating figure who moved to Dongguan as a migrant worker himself, wrote poetry in the process, and eventually turned into a critic, even setting up a poetry training centre for migrant workers under the Literature and Art Federation of Dongguan. A series of articles in major literary journals in the early 2000s and his book-length study *Cong xiangcun dao chengshi de jingshen taiji: Zhongguo “dagong shige” de baipishu* 从乡村到城市的精神胎记：关于 “打工诗歌” 的白皮书 (*Spiritual Birthmark on the Journey from Country to City: A White Book on “Migrant Workers’ Poetry”*) secured his nationwide breakthrough as one of the major experts on the matter. These essays were later brought together and expanded in his 600-odd-page *Dagong wenxue de zhengti guancha* 打工文学的整体观察 (*A Comprehensive Survey of Migrant Workers’ Literature*). While he is clearly more

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<sup>41</sup> Yang Honghai, “‘Dagong wenxue’ de lishi jiyi,” 44.

interested in what has been written by migrant workers, he tries to make *dagong* literature as inclusive as possible.<sup>42</sup>

“打工作家”虽然是“打工文学”的重要创作主体，但两者并不构成决定性的关系。“打工作家”，是指具有打工身份或曾经具有打工身份的作家。“打工文学”不一定要打工人来写，“打工作家”写的不一定是“打工文学”，其它“非打工作家”同样可以写出“打工文学”。

*Dagong* writers constitute the main creative body of *dagong* literature, but by no means are the two bound together by an absolute relationship. The diction *dagong writer* refers to authors whose identity is that of a migrant worker or who have had experience as migrant workers themselves. *Dagong* literature does not have to be written by migrant workers, just like *dagong* writers do not necessarily have to write *dagong* literature. Other non-*dagong* writers can also write *dagong* literature.<sup>43</sup>

(Zhang Qinghua 张清华 argues that Liu Dongwu is a living example that no excessive importance should be attached to social identity, given that he has continued to be a specialist in *dagong* poetry with an invaluable inner gaze although he is no longer a migrant worker himself.)<sup>44</sup> The problem remains for those authors who do not recognise themselves with the *dagong* label. Some perceive that labels are limiting of their creative self, and would therefore rather consider

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<sup>42</sup> In the passages by Yang Honghai and Liu Dongwu, I have just transliterated *dagong* when it occurs in association with “literature” or “writer,” essentially because it would have been confusing to differentiate a “migrant workers’ literature,” where the English genitive implies parenthood by individuals who are migrant workers themselves, and “migrant-worker literature,” linguistically more elastic in that regard. The same applies to “battler,” “battlers” and “battlers,” following van Crevel’s proposed translation. *Dagong wenxue* continues to elude a wholly satisfactory translation, but in so doing it constantly stimulates scholars’ reflections on these key issues of authorship and identity.

<sup>43</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Dagong wenxue*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> Zhang Qinghua, ““Diceng shengcun xiezuo,”” 49.

themselves *poets* or *writers* without further adjectives. There are also some who, perhaps out of sheer interest, also dismiss the title after they have made a name of themselves. The pejorative connotation of *dagong* makes it all more undesirable for some authors to be labelled as such. Yet, one more problem is represented by worker authors who do not write about worker-related themes at all, compelling one to wonder what actual sense it makes to call them *worker* authors in the first place.

Setting criteria is therefore crucial to delimit the object of analysis, and helps having a sense of the authors. Privileging an author-based approach (i.e. authors must be migrant workers themselves) is also useful to certain kinds of analysis. For example, Liu Dong 刘东, in his widely-cited essay “Jianmin de gechang” 贱民的歌唱 (The Songs of the Subalterns), considers the role of writing to uncover sections of society that are otherwise absent in mainstream discourse and representation (by people who actually belong to those sections), while van Crevel ponders on the cultural translation that poetry can possibly bring to the labourers who take it up—and therefore on its social power to change individuals’ lives.<sup>45</sup> Authorial identity is of crucial importance also if workers’ poetry is analysed as self-representation that counters the mis-representations of migrant lives by mainstream media, like the one carried out by Dooling.<sup>46</sup>

Practitioners, by contrast, tend to have a much more elastic approach to the problem. The case studies in chapter Three and part II will explore this point further by presenting individual authors and their different motivations for writing (different also from other actors, such as activists or mediators, that promote their cultural engagement), but let us pause a moment to consider “Guanyu dagong shige” 关于打工诗歌 (About Migrant Workers’ Poetry), a work by the migrant worker poet Zhang Shougang 张守刚, already a noteworthy instance of this metatextual discourse, also because it appears to be aimed precisely at these debates:

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<sup>45</sup> Liu Dong, “Jianmin de gechang;” van Crevel, “The Cultural Translation.”

<sup>46</sup> Dooling, “Representing Dagongmei.”

是打工人写的诗  
还是打工人  
写的打工题材的诗  
这都不重要 我在打工  
我在打工的空余时间  
用分行的文字  
叙述我周围的异乡人的生活  
用泥土般的语言  
用乡愁一样的格式  
写工卡 工棚  
满身是泥的建筑工人  
写工卡 上班的铃声  
钢筋水泥支起的厂房  
还有工伤中  
切断的手指和老板的良心  
有人说这是诗吧 这不就是  
我们一日复一日的生活  
它走进我们的日常  
可为什么会  
抽动我们的心灵

is it poetry written by migrant workers  
or poetry on migrant-worker themes  
written by migrant workers

it all doesn't matter I'm a migrant worker  
in the free time left after work  
I tell the lives of strangers surrounding me  
with characters arranged in verses  
I write of employment cards of work sheds  
of construction workers caked with mud  
with a language of clay  
with a form like nostalgia  
I write of employment cards of sirens announcing the start of day  
of workshops held up by reinforced concrete  
and then there's injuries on the workplace  
cut fingers and the boss' good heart  
someone says this is poetry! isn't it just  
our life day after day  
it has entered our everyday  
but why will it  
twitch our soul<sup>47</sup>

Essentially, the issues delineated above concern who is authorised to speak about and on behalf of migrant workers. Zhang Shougang does not address this problem in an explicit way, but of course the centrality he attributes to having a real experience of the life represented in his poetry once again warns us against forgetting about authors' social (class) background.

Another problem concerns the delimitations of migrant workers' literature, or, so to speak, its bordering regions. When academic debate about migrant workers' literature soared in the middle 2000s, scholars of literature were concomitantly gripped with a similar topic—subaltern literature

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<sup>47</sup> Zhang Shougang, "Guanyu dagong shige."

(*diceng wenxue* 底层文学).<sup>48</sup> The debut of subaltern literature is generally dated to 2004, when Cao Zhenglu 曹征路 published the story “Na’er” 那儿 (There) in *Dangdai* 当代. The protagonist of the story is a union leader who finds himself in the uneasy position of having to both represent the interests of the state (given the governmental affiliation of trade unions in China) and to stand up for workers who are facing lay-off as their SOE is about to be dismantled. This inextricable contradiction, and its eventual (self-)destructive conclusion, can easily be interpreted as a critique of the liberalisation wave of the 1990s. According to Li Yunlei 李云雷, one of the foremost scholars on subaltern literature, the key of “Na’er,” which he considers “the realist work most representative of this epoch” (这一时期最有代表性的现实主义力作), is to be found in its ability to give expression to the voices of individuals who are left behind by the post-socialist socio-economic order, literally “those who ‘have been Reform-ed’ and have paid the price for it” (那些付出代价的“被改革者”).<sup>49</sup> Others seemed to agree on the game-changing importance of the story, and in the same year, *Tianya* 天涯 (*Frontiers*) kicked off a debate on subaltern literature. In addition to Cao Zhenglu, other authors were included in the line-up of subaltern literature writers, including Wang Xiangfu 王祥夫, Liu Jiming 刘继明, Chen Yingsong 陈应松, Wu Jun 吴君, Hu Xuewen 胡学文,

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<sup>48</sup> The word *diceng* offers no easier translation than *dagong*. The common translation as “subaltern” is efficacious, but is loaded with theoretical implications, calling into question the uses of the term at least on the part of Marx, Gramsci and Spivak. “Subaltern” itself is not the only literal translation of *diceng*, although sometimes *diceng* is used to translate “subaltern” in, for example, Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, alongside other possible translations, such as *jianmin* 贱民 or the more classical-sounding *shumin* 庶民. *Diceng* may be translated more literally as “lower stratum,” or “underclass,” which calls into question the relationship of the category of the subaltern with that of class. Li Yunlei is purposeful in advancing a word that does not reflect class. Citing Negri and Hardt, Li acknowledges that *diceng* is “vague,” but that is its strength, because it copes with the inability of words such as “proletariat” or “people” to attract the necessary forces for social change (Li Yunlei, “Subaltern Literature,” 65).

<sup>49</sup> Li Yunlei, 2014b: 77, 103.



Luo Weizhang 罗伟章. They all shared an interest in a realist representation of topics such as layoffs, factories, mines, imbalance between city and countryside, gender, contrasts between intellectuals and the common people, and outcasts of society such as prostitutes and poor peddlers.

In the heated discussions that sprang from the *Tianya* debate, subaltern literature was seen mainly in opposition to pure literature (*chun wenxue* 纯文学) and its elevation above the mundane reality of social life. Eventually, Li Yunlei coined the following definition for subaltern literature:

在内容上，它主要描写底层的生活中的人与事；在形式上，它以现实主义为主，但并不排斥艺术上的创新与探索；在写作态度，对底层有着同情与悲悯之心，但背后可以有不同的思想资源；在传统上，它主要继续了20世纪“左翼文学”与民主主义、自由主义文学的传统，但有融入了新的思想与新的创作。

In terms of content, it principally describes individuals and facts that have to do with the lives of the subalterns; in terms of form, it privileges realism, but it is far from warding off artistic invention and experimentation; in terms of attitude towards writing, it maintains a sentiment of sympathy and empathy for the subalterns, even if, behind it, one can find diverse ideological resources; in terms of tradition, it above all perpetuates the tradition of 20th-century “left-wing literature” and democratic, liberal literature, but integrating them with new ideas and creativity.<sup>50</sup>

Naturally, writers versed in the social problems of 21st-century China could not dodge migrant workers. And unsurprisingly, migrant workers are not rare to be found in the works of these authors. This may be part of the reason that convinced Li Yunlei to handle discussions on subaltern literature as an overarching framework that includes migrant workers’/dagong literature. Another scholar, Yang Qingfa 杨清发 goes even further by claiming that the latter can be understood as the

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<sup>50</sup> Li Yunlei, *Xin shiji “diceng wenxue,”* 3.

most representative sector of subaltern literature, precisely because it is more “authentic” (where again authenticity is granted by provenance from “the ground” and really-lived experience).<sup>51</sup> Li Yunlei, for his part, recognised significant differences between subaltern and migrant workers’ literatures, especially from the point of view of authors’ background. He also spots a number of issues with migrant workers’ literature, especially the pre-eminence of individual problems over a larger (and critical) view (achieved instead by subaltern literature), and the susceptibility of *dagong* authors themselves to be co-opted by cultural institutions into becoming full-time writers, thus losing touch with their base and social origin.<sup>52</sup> Other scholars, such as Wang Yao 王尧 and Shao Yanjun 邵燕君, insist more on the differences between *diceng* and *dagong*, pointing out how subaltern literature is written by intellectuals who depict the hardships of the common people, but still remain in the field of elite literature, whereas it is migrant workers who are true subalterns<sup>53</sup> (although Shao also adds that a problem of *dagong* literature is its lagging behind the novel advancements of China’s literary life, seemingly stuck with the style of Scar fiction and Obscure poetry).<sup>54</sup> Surprisingly (but only in part), Zhang Yiwu 张颐武 elevates migrant workers’ literature against the catastrophist distortions of subaltern literature, that concentrates exclusively on the dark side of China’s development, whereas *dagong* authors can re-establish readers’ trust in progress.<sup>55</sup> *En passant*, Yang Honghai was also critiquing those *dagong* writers who were presenting the Chinese reform as something comparable to primitive capitalist accumulation, as well as urging to overcome the binary between the bad city and the good country, as early as the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> But these

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<sup>51</sup> Yang Qingfa, “Cong ‘diceng shenghuo’ dao ‘diceng shige.’”

<sup>52</sup> Li Yunlei, *Xin shiji* “*diceng wenxue*,” 184–185.

<sup>53</sup> Wang Yao, “Guanyu ‘diceng xiezuo,’” 146; Shao Yanjun, “Dang ‘xiangtu’ jinru ‘diceng,’” 175.

<sup>54</sup> Shao Yanjun, *ibidem*, 176.

<sup>55</sup> Zhang Yiwu, “Zai ‘Zhongguo meng’ de mianqian,” 166–67.

<sup>56</sup> Yang Honghai, 2000b: 717–718.

arguments have a point, and the other side of the coin of empathy is an overemphasis on sufferance and hardship, which fails to convey a full picture of the subalterns' reality. There is a striking assonance with the "grief-stricken attitude" displayed by left-wing writers in the early 20th century that, despite its sympathy, essentially denied the subalterns their agency.<sup>57</sup>

To sum up, once again, it is a matter of authorial identity. Surely, in terms of the crucial triptych of *by*, *for* and *about*, subaltern literature is fundamentally based on its content. Including migrant workers' literature under this definition would then raise a problem of the importance attributed to authors' identity as a founding trait for a literary delimitation, and how much it affects writing itself. In general, however, the debate shows how much these questions of inclusion and exclusion are able to stir up the intellectual minds, which is in turn a sign of the importance assigned by scholars, and equally by critics on the field, to find clarity about these criteria, or boundaries.

Finally, while migrant workers' writing has also been framed in explicit contrast to "Reform literature" (*gaige wenxue* 改革文学) or "industrial(-themed) literature" (*gongye ticaì wenxue* 工业题材文学), which only extolled the merits of entrepreneurs and Reform-enthusiast individuals,<sup>58</sup> other peripheral extensions of *dagong* literature have been also spotted in travel literature (*lǚwài wenxue* 旅外文学) from Guangdong, which includes individuals who went abroad for work, becoming transnational migrant workers themselves<sup>59</sup> (the case of the Italian-based migrant worker poet Deng Yuehua 邓跃华 is a case in point).<sup>60</sup> One might push the argument even further and suggest that migrant workers' literatures in the larger Sinosphere, like *yimingong wenxue* 移民工文学 in Taiwan, tease for a global (and/or internationalist) expansion of the scope of *dagong* literature

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<sup>57</sup> Pesaro, "The Fiction of Left-Wing Writers," 89–90.

<sup>58</sup> Yang Honghai, "Dagong shijie yu dagong wenxue," 716.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, 730–731. See also Sun Wanning, "Poetry of Labour."

<sup>60</sup> Pedone, "Nuove declinazioni identitarie," 103–106.

beyond the mainland itself. Be it as it is, these provocative thoughts supplement the discussion above to show that *dagong*, as an adjective for a literature produced by migrant workers, can be used and has been used in very different ways, some narrower than other, and that boundary-drawing, just like naming, are political acts that vary according to the agendas of the mediators (cultural bodies and officials, patrons, activists), much more than the practitioners themselves.

### 2.3. Social relevance versus artistic value

The appearance of migrant workers' literature has clearly produced a considerable amount of critical commentary, and that has been particularly true since academic radars in China have set on it. Actually, Liu Dongwu suspects that the majority of critics do not even read what they comment on, evidenced by the fact that the most important essays appeared during the debate—including the most enthusiastic and sympathetic among them—cited always the same authors and poems (incidentally, those that Liu himself had recommended to the critics in question).<sup>61</sup> But this alleged negligence has not prevented a rich and engaging discussion, and if anything, if we are to pardon this intellectual laziness, it suggests that literary matters, especially when it comes to workers' literature, often hide other questions, primarily of aesthetic ideology, for which it will be important to bring back to mind the theoretical questions discussed in chapter One.

Attempts have been made to group the various voices that have made themselves heard (and this very chapter is part of the effort, of course). Li Yunlei's "*Diceng wenxue*" *yanjiu duben* "底层文学" 研究读本 (*The "Subaltern Literature" Studies Reader*) is state-of-the-art, benefitting from fairly recent publication (2018), although commentary on migrant worker authors proper is overlapped by and sometimes buried under a larger discussion on subaltern literature. He Xuan's 何

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<sup>61</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Dagong wenxue*, 35.

轩 *Zhongguo “dagong shige” jilu yu pingdian* 中国“打工诗歌”辑录与评点 (*A Compilation and Discussion of Chinese Migrant Workers’ Poetry*) and “Xin shiji dagong shige yanjiu shuping” 新世纪打工诗歌研究述评 (*Review of the Studies on Migrant Workers’ Poetry in the New Century*), both from 2010, are worth mentioning.<sup>62</sup> Van Crevel’s “The Cultural Translation of Battlers Poetry (*Dagong shige*)” also engages in a critical way with the existing scholarship, identifying the different positions and interests at play, which make him quite spot-on in presenting the “commentary as conflict.” In particular, this conflict revolves around the key imaginary opposition between “high social significance and low aesthetic value,”<sup>63</sup> something that van Crevel partly attributes to a sort of “cultural un-translatability” of migrant workers’ poetry into the realm of academic criticism. After all, scholarly debates, sympathetic and scornful alike, can be as distant from the actual practitioners as the poles asunder. Yet, they are also revealing of conflicting tendencies in society. As Sun Wanning has pointedly observed,

Although the debates surrounding *dagong* poetry have unfolded in literary circles and have been framed in terms of literary standards, it is not hard to see that this is in fact a struggle for the right to speak, to adopt the most effective discursive strategy, and to reclaim the role of the workers and peasants as the legitimate and most authoritative “historical speaking subject.”<sup>64</sup>

Of course, one might add that this struggle also lays bare the workings of the gatekeepers of the “literary temple,” the expectations and fears around socially-engaged arts, the hopes (or delusions) of resurgence among the academic left (and its limitations as well), and possibly much more. It tells us something of the actual reception of workers’ literature among academic circles,

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<sup>62</sup> Li Yunlei, “*Diceng wenxue*” *yanjiu wenben*; He Xuan, *Zhongguo “dagong shige,”* “Xin shiji dagong shige.”

<sup>63</sup> Van Crevel, “The Cultural Translation,” 275.

<sup>64</sup> Sun, “Poetry of Labour,” 1005.

while also revealing where prevailing lines of interpretation come from. That includes the opposition between social relevance and artistic value, which may seem inevitable or even natural, but it is neither of those, so long as we are willing to “[extend] beyond elite contexts the idea of engaging with literature on its own terms.”<sup>65</sup>

Liu Dongwu is one of the staunchest advocates of migrant workers’ poetry as fully and properly *poetry*. His line of reasoning crosses the artistic and the social, combining them into an organic analysis that engages with the terms of intellectual debates. For him, *dagong* poetry—and poets as public figures—are first of all the product of their time: “Migrant worker poets are not a [literary] group that has dragged itself together, but a historical phenomenon, *a process* [my italics]. It is owing to their shared historical context, personal life experience and creative practice that they have come to form a distinguishable style” (“打工诗人“不是一个拉起来的帮派，而是一个历史现象、一个过程，由于他们大致的历史背景、个人生活经历和创作体验，形成相近的风格”).<sup>66</sup> This socio-historical background is also what determines their artistic traits, then. The peculiar life experience of these individuals belonging to a distinct class in China’s social stratification inevitably leaves a “stamp” (印记) or a “trace” (痕迹) in their creative soul, so deep and intense that those who have not had similar experiences themselves will hardly be able to fully appreciate the value of “truthfulness” (真实) transmitted by migrant workers’ poems—essentially then, their social significance.<sup>67</sup> This all connects to truth, or *zhen*, as a property of good literature pursued by May Fourth writers and beyond (see chapter One), and takes nothing away from art:

诗人手中的笔是剖析时代、社会、生活和暴力及不平等现象的一把手术刀，是深测心灵深度、道德深度的尺子。[...] 只有一些“打工诗人”才有资格去表达打工一族的存在、命运和处境，

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<sup>65</sup> Van Crevel, “The Cultural Translation,” 280.

<sup>66</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Dagong wenxue*, 308.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, 282, 298.

处理打工题材的诗歌只有到了“打工诗人”这里才能揭开本质的触动。真正意义上的“打工诗歌”必须由“打工诗人”来完成，不是他们选择了“打工诗歌”，而是“打工诗歌”选择了他们。

In the hands of the poet, the pen becomes a scalpel to dissect the times, society, life and violence, as well as inequality, a ruler to measure the profundity of the soul and morality. [...] Only a few migrant worker poets have the resources to represent the life, fates and condition of migrant workers as a group. Poetry that deals with the themes of migrant labour is able to uncover its intrinsic emotional power only once it arrives in the hands of migrant worker poets. Migrant workers' poetry, in its true essence, can be done only by migrant worker poets. It is not them who choose to do migrant-worker poetry, but it is migrant-worker poetry that chooses them.<sup>68</sup>

In other words, Liu Dongwu insists that poetry is a serious matter and should be taken seriously, so seriously that this passage of his on the power of poetry and the origins of poetic inspiration draw directly from the earliest formulation on poetry by Chinese tradition of all time, “The Poem articulates what is in the mind intently” (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志), extracted from the *Shujing* 书经 (*Classic of Documents*) but then rearticulated in the Great Preface to the *Shijing* 诗经 (*Classic of Poetry*),<sup>69</sup> but it also travels two thousand years to meet Yang Lian's statement that “Poetry writes the poet.” Liu Dongwu then is not suggesting that workers are advancing a radically novel conception of poetry, or readapting the art to their class-based purposes. On the contrary, he is presenting them as doing true poetry, perfectly aligned with the most authoritative poetical aesthetics. Hence, he is opposed to any preferential treatment for workers' poetry, because migrant workers who have chosen this art as their expressive form must be up to their choice. Their

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*: 266, 302.

<sup>69</sup> Owen, *Readings*, 26.

insufficiencies and immaturity should not be hidden. And yet, any literary trend has its own issues, that in the case of migrant workers' poetry are due in particular to its authors' precarious living conditions, often barring them from taking good care of their own artistic training.<sup>70</sup> A skilful use of the language and an artistically valid representation “determine the profundity of the poet's understanding of life, and are the necessary conditions for migrant worker poets' transition from appearance to essence, from superficiality to the deeper levels of representation, from craft to aesthetics” (决定着诗人对存在理解的深度, 是“打工诗人”从现象走向本质、从表象走向深层、从功力走向审美的必要条件).<sup>71</sup>

Other commentators hold that it is precisely these limits that cannot qualify what is produced by migrant workers in the present day as literature proper. These sceptics or detractors rarely, if ever, openly oppose the entrance of an unlikely category of authors in the “temple of literature”. No one apparently erects the class boundary in explicit terms, and on the contrary, doubtful commentaries generally feel the need to clarify that they do not question the social relevance of these works. Scepticism is always expressed along literary lines. Migrant workers' poetry is immature, formally coarse and scanty, and more akin to social commentary than to true poetry.<sup>72</sup> Wu Yiqin 吴义勤 argues that the literary world should be “worried and alert” (忧虑和警惕) against the “distortion and suffocation of literature ‘in the name of literature’” (以“文学的名义”进行的对文学的歪曲与遮蔽), derived by an excessive empathy towards writers from the bottoms of society that obfuscates a rigorous analysis based on literary quality.<sup>73</sup> Qian Wenliang 钱文亮, one of the most vocal personalities in this train of thought, also sees the risk of uniformity and intellectual dullness in giving up the most essential traits of poetry as an art, in a repetition of the

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 323.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, 326.

<sup>72</sup> Yang Qingfa, “Cong ‘diceng shenghuo’ dao ‘diceng shige.’”

<sup>73</sup> Wu Yiqin, “‘Diceng wenxue’ ‘re,’” 143–144.



political, moral, thematical and stylistic imperatives that constrained worker-peasant-soldier literature during the Mao era (a concern also expressed by Wu Yiqin). In his words,

诗人的写作只应该遵循“诗歌伦理”来进行。[...]没有这种来自艺术本身要求的诗歌伦理意识，诗人很容易在流行的道德观念和时髦的公共性说法中迷失自己，最终导致的反而是诗歌对民族、人类精神解放与文化创造这一长远价值贡献的丧失。

In their writing, poets should only adhere to the ethics of poetry. [...] Without such an awareness of the ethics of poetry stemming from the basic needs of the art itself, poets can easily lose themselves in the midst of mainstream morality or fashionable ways of speaking among the general public. The eventual result is, on the contrary, the loss of poetry's contribution to the nation, the liberation of the human spirit and cultural creativity—whose value is visible in the long term.<sup>74</sup>

What the “ethics of poetry” is open to debate, of course. And it is curious to see how the “contributions” that workers’ poetry would be missing out are precisely those that other commentators see in it. Not incidentally, Wu Yiqin lambasts a “‘sanctification’ of subaltern writers’ identity” (底层作家身份的“神圣化”),<sup>75</sup> which is precisely the point in conjuring up a neutral aesthetics that actually functions as an ideological gatekeeper. Furthermore, basing one’s analysis on an aesthetics that exists only in abstraction fails to see not only the different uses that poetry (and literature in general) takes once it falls into the hands of groups of individuals with very different social backgrounds.

Diametrically opposed to these positions, Zhang Weimin 张未民 is a public face in the intellectual camp that has always enthusiastically welcomed migrant workers’ poetry. In an article

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<sup>74</sup> Qian Wenliang, “Lunli yu shige lunli,” 268.

<sup>75</sup> Wu Yiqin, “‘Diceng wenzue’ ‘re,’” 143.

he wrote in 2005, at the peak of the academic debate, he put forward an interesting division of the literary practice. On the one hand, he argued, there are intellectuals who live off writing, and who have their own cultural life. Even when they describe life in the lower rungs of society, they do so looking down on it, even if in a sympathetic way—this is “surviving in writing” (在写作中生存). On the other hand stands “writing while surviving” (在生存中写作), carried out by individuals who live in any type of adverse conditions, and despite their rudimentary or unstable comprehension of literature, have been attracted to the instrument of writing to express themselves. It goes without saying that migrant workers’ literature belongs to the latter category. As such, the main characteristics Zhang identifies in it are a reflection of “the basic conditions and emotional aspects of survival” (基本生存状态和感受) and “spirit of struggle” (奋斗的精神) to cope with everyday life, a “genuine spirit of reality” (真正的现实精神) without the gimmicks of “spiritual illusions of aesthetics” (审美的精神幻想), and an approach centred on “capital-letter individual” (大写的人), i.e. the real life of people, instead of the artificial “enlightening language” (启蒙话语) and “humanist spirit” (人文精神) of high literature.<sup>76</sup> Zhang then points out that migrant workers’ literature provides an unprecedentedly clear gaze on the raw reality where its authors come from, but in order to recognise its potentiality, he advances his much-discussed conclusion that “If they sacrifice some ‘aesthetic technique’ for the sake of their own ‘spirit of reality’ and ‘spirit of the individual’, literature can forgive them” (他们为了自己的“现实精神”和“人的精神”，牺牲一些“美学技巧”也就可以得到文学的原谅了).<sup>77</sup>

This conclusion by Zhang Yimin’s appears in a vast amount of commentary published after his essay, because it is precisely around the question of how “lenient” should one be in evaluating migrant workers’ literature according to “pure” (read hegemonic) artistic standards that the

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<sup>76</sup> Zhang Weimin, “Shengcunxing zhuanhuawei jingshenxing.”

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, 274–275.

controversy unfolds. Indeed, it would seem that the more the level of primacy attached to social significance rises, the less one can expect in terms of artistic quality—and while for some it is preposterous, for others it is stimulating. For Sun Wanning, it is absolutely legitimate to see migrant workers' narratives as “a most explicit form of subaltern cultural expression” whose power “derives not so much from their sophisticated use of language as from the fact that they are self-ethnographic.”<sup>78</sup> The two can be complementary parts of the literary endeavour. Form, according to these critics, should not necessarily obliterate content, and its ability to represent reality. Zhang Qinghua reminds us that truthfulness (*zhenshi* 真实) has long been “not only a basic request of writing, but also a fundamental moral standard for writers” (不但是写作的基本要求, 而且还是一个写作者基本的伦理标尺),<sup>79</sup> thus defending the presence of elements of literariness in migrant workers' writing despite all its defects. Yang Qingfa adds that the “literary relevance and value” (文学意义与价值) of migrant workers' writing is to be found in the elements of novelty they bring to contemporary literature, contributing to an enrichment of its themes.<sup>80</sup> An original approach is advanced by a semiotic study conducted by Liu Guoxin 刘国欣, who argues that the artistic “code” (*bianma* 编码) in migrant workers' literature is weaker than its social “code,” causing readers from other backgrounds to wrongly decode it concentrating exclusively on its sociological aspect and failing to see its artistic quality.<sup>81</sup>

Even on the part of sympathisers with migrant workers' literature, dismissing its formal shortcomings on ground of its social or thematic importance may not be the best defence. Justifying literary rawness is utterly wrong according to He Shaojun 贺绍俊, because, even when done with

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<sup>78</sup> Sun Wanning, *Subaltern China*, 192.

<sup>79</sup> Zhang Qinghua, “‘Diceng shengcun xiezu,’” 258.

<sup>80</sup> Yang Qingfa, “‘Cong ‘diceng shenghuo’ dao ‘diceng shige,’” 38.

<sup>81</sup> Liu Guoxin, “Shiyuzhe de chuchang.”

the best of intentions, it “ends up harming oneself. For if artistic quality does not necessarily mean fine forms, a crude style can also be artistically high or low” (误伤了自己。因为艺术质量不等同于精致，粗粝的风格同样会有艺术高下的区分).<sup>82</sup> In actuality, He Shaojun is referring to subaltern literature here, seen by him as the ideal complement of pure literature, which is a doubtful reconciliation attempt. Leng Shuang 冷霜 is more persuasive in this respect. In his view, admitting that the lack of aesthetic quality of migrant workers’ literature is an acceptable loss is not convincing at all. Instead, it should be recognised that some critics use aesthetics as an empty shell, “a common-sense appearance accepted uncritically” (空洞的、不加反思的普遍性面貌), and that they have not really done any thorough analysis of the literary and extra-literary components of this literature.<sup>83</sup> The alternative then is to promote “a cultural and aesthetic self-consciousness” (一种文化和美学上的自觉) and “an original and independent aesthetic mode” (自身独立的美学形态).<sup>84</sup> He also explicitly cites Wu Ji’s Workers’ Poetry Alliance as a successful step in this direction.

The point is well taken and it touches upon a fundamental problem found in much of the commentary: it generally sets off from hegemonic aesthetics and moves under its conditions, either claiming the legitimacy of workers’ literature to be included in this aesthetics, or justifying its noncompliance (while asking for forgiveness). Rarely is this hegemonic aesthetics ever contested, although that may be the way out of the quandary. This direction is taken by Li Yunlei’s tentative elaboration on a “new workers’ aesthetics” (*xin gongren meixue* 新工人美学), also cited by Lei Shuang as his source of inspiration. Li discusses the concept in a 2014 article based on his experience as a member in the vetting committee for a workers’ writing prize in Picun, “‘Xin gongren wenxue’ de mengya yu kenengxing” “新工人美学”的萌芽与可能性 (The Sprouts and

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<sup>82</sup> He Shaojun, “‘Diceng wenxue’ de shehuixing yu wenxuexing,” 89.

<sup>83</sup> Leng Shuang, “‘Dagong shige’ de meixue zhengyi,” 22.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, 23.

Potentialities of a “New Workers’ Aesthetics”). Elaborating the difficulty of integrating a faithful and powerful reflection of workers’ life with strict artistic criteria in judging the competing works, Li concludes that a critique conducted according to present-day standards is flawed, since those standards are based on the “new-aesthetic principles” (新美学原则) produced by the elite, modernist and Western-oriented environment of the 1980s. The solution would be to integrate those principles with the “people’s aesthetics” (人民美学) of the Mao era and an assessment of the concrete creative practice of worker authors. What this “people’s aesthetics” exactly means is not clarified, although it may easily refer to the priority of content over form, the ability to reflect social life, and a focus on authors’ social class (and possibly their intended readership). It is interesting that even in this solution, there is no integral negation of post-Reform literary aesthetics, as Li seems to recognise its merits, especially to update the theoretical instruments of critique (not incidentally, Li remains an individual who is well-adjusted in the state cultural apparatus whose formative years were between the late 1990s and the early 2000s). Essentially, his aesthetics is made up of four points:

(1) 在立场上, “新工人美学”应该站在新工人及底层民众的立场上, 书写他们的生活经验与内心世界; (2) 在艺术上, “新工人美学”应该创造出自己的高级文化——即可以与经典作品相媲美但又与之不同的新经典, 也就是说我们不能因为立场正确而忽视美学上的追求, 只有这样, “新工人美学”才足以与资产阶级美学相竞争, 并在整体文艺生态中处于先进的位置; (3) 在与生活的关系上, “新工人美学”应该从生活中来, 到生活中去, 来自生活中的真切感受, 并在生活中起到重要的作用, 当然对生活的重视并非是要否定对经典作品的借鉴, 但经典作品只是流而非“源”, 我们可以继承, 但不必模仿; (4) 在发展方向上, “新工人美学”应该继承“人民美学”与“新的美学原则”的不同探索, 在融会中创造出新的中国文化与中国文艺。

1) In terms of positionality, “new workers’ aesthetics” should stand on the position of new workers and the subaltern masses, writing their life experience and inner world; 2) Artistically, “new workers’ aesthetics” must create its own high-level culture, i.e. it can emulate the classics or produce new classics different from those. In other words we cannot overlook an aesthetic pursue only because our position is correct. Only this way can “new workers’ aesthetics” properly compete with bourgeois aesthetics, and acquire an advanced position in the artistic scene as a whole; 3) On the relation with life, “new workers’ aesthetics” should come from life and return to life, it should be vividly affected by life, and then play an important role in life itself. Of course the focus on life in no ways should negate the lessons that come from the classics, although the classics should be a current and not a source, we can inherit them, but not imitate them; 4) Concerning the orientation of its development, “new workers’ aesthetics” should inherit the different researches carried forward by “people’s aesthetics” and “new aesthetic principles”, creating a new Chinese culture and a new Chinese literature and arts in the process of integrating them.<sup>85</sup>

Citing this passage in full is useful not only to get a sense of Li Yunlei’s proposal for a different aesthetics, but also to see how it is fundamentally indebted to Mao’s “Yan’an Talks,” which it mimics especially on the role of authors’ position (political in Mao’s case, socio-cultural here), on the relation between artistic refinement and “positional” correctness, and also on the relation with classical literature, as well as in terms of the prescriptive style. Of course, the persistent authority of the “Talks” is hardly a surprising discovery.

However, the reason why such debates grew so heated—and productive—is probably also due to the cultural nerve it hit, namely the vexed question of the poet’s social responsibility. As Inwood explains in a fundamental essay, “Between License and Responsibility,” whether the poet should be engaged with social problems as a public intellectual or privilege an exclusive concern with their art

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<sup>85</sup> Li Yunlei, “‘Xin gongren wenxue,’” 22.

is still much of an open question.<sup>86</sup> Even one of the foremost scholars on China's pure literature, Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, has expressed an interest in subaltern authors precisely because, in his view, they have restored to literature its social role.<sup>87</sup> Generally speaking, the vast majority of commentators recognised and commented on this point, even when they were doubtful of worker authors' artistic quality. Nevertheless, the way this engagement should unfold in practice has also generated controversy. That migrant workers' poetry—together with grassroots poetry, quake poetry and disaster writing, mainly related to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake—have re-established the marriage between poetry and society is positive, argues Luo Xiaofeng 罗小凤, but not if poetry ends up being “kidnapped by reality” (被现实绑架了). Such kidnapping takes the form of a monothematic overflow of hardship-related feelings, a dull style that limits itself to “register” (记录) facts, and the sacrifice of individuality in favour of a spokesperson's role.<sup>88</sup> Here Luo espouses his fellow scholar Jiang Shuzhuo's 将述卓 point that even those who have actually experienced migrant labour tend to idealise it one way or another, which is strongly disputable.<sup>89</sup> A solution to this superficiality of representation would be reinterpreting reality according to one's artistic individuality, reaching an organic synthesis between external reality and personal experience, and moving from reality itself to an exploration into the deepest human soul.<sup>90</sup>

Both the ancient question of the poet's social responsibility and the problem of the method of their engagement with reality are directly related to the role played by experience in migrant workers' creative sensitivity. Chapter One has already discussed the matter at length, but it is useful to emphasise that experience, while ultimately the foundation of all literature, acquires a special

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<sup>86</sup> Inwood, “Between License and Responsibility.”

<sup>87</sup> Chen Xiaoming, “‘Renminxing’ yu meixue de tuoshenshu,” 130.

<sup>88</sup> Luo Xiaofeng, “Bei shixian bangjia.”

<sup>89</sup> Jiang Shuzhuo, “Xianshi guanhuai.”

<sup>90</sup> Luo Xiaofeng, “Bei shixian bangjia,” 30–32.

importance in the case of a genre that is delimited precisely by its authors' social background, and the way their lives in a certain social formation have shaped their creativity. This point actually concerns several objections moved to contemporary workers' literature in general (and not only contemporary—and not only workers', actually), namely that it is thematically monotonous, or that it portrays reality in an excessively negative way. The *dagong* poet Xu Qiang addressed these issues in an article he wrote for *Shikan*, “Wo xiexia de, dou shi wo suo jingli de” 我写下的，都是我所经历的 (Everything I Write, I Have Experienced Myself). The context is also interesting here, since this is a piece written by an already discretely-established worker poet for the journal of the cultural elite in order to affirm the validity of workers' poetry. Xu Qiang seems to play with a metaphorical extension of *guxiang* 故乡, the native land, as the real hometown that has generated migrants, and as the “fertile soil” of experience that has generated their poetics:

如果我们没有经历过打工生活，我们很难知道它们的真实：生活真实、内心真实、写作真实。  
[...] 我们写下的都是我们经历的，生活的经历，心灵的经历。对于我们来说，汗水泪水血水永远是写作坚实的大地。

Had we not gone through a life of precarious labour, we would have hardly got to know their realities: the reality of life, the reality of the inner self, the reality of writing. [...] We have lived through everything we write about. It's our life experience, our spiritual experience. For us, our sweat, our tears and our blood are the robust fertile soil that breeds our writing.<sup>91</sup>

And thus one should not be surprised by the apparent recurrence of the same themes throughout migrant workers' poetry. It has to do with the main motive force of their writing. The apparent thematic monotony, Liu Dongwu contends, can be contextualised by recognising that such

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<sup>91</sup> Xu Qiang, “Wo xie xia de,” 90.



poetry is born of the “condition of the self” (自身处境) of the poets, which has brought them to “register it, narrate it, and place it in front of people who have been caught by a persistent amnesia” (记录它、陈述它、把它摆在一贯具有健忘癖的人们面前).<sup>92</sup> It is also, in a way, the result of the “self-ethnography” Sun Wanning refers to when he talks about subaltern narratives. But it does not stop there. For Liu Dongwu, migrant workers’ poetry happens exactly in the encounter between experience and language, and it is never merely the registration of raw facts.<sup>93</sup> In this indissoluble twist of experience and creativity lies the conflation of, instead of contradiction between, social and artistic value: Zeng Xianlin 曾宪林 and Wen Wen 温雯 hold that the social value of migrant workers’ literature is in its ability not only to represent society, but in comforting those who write while doing so, and in turn to uplift the spirit and morality of readers. But social value comes together with its literary value, which consists in the production of a popular (民间), “naturally plain” (自然质朴) style based on a sort of social heteroglossia (众语喧哗), which keep the link between literature and society intact.<sup>94</sup>

Although these are some of the main points of the “commentary as conflict” revolving around the questions of aesthetics and quality, other aspects recur as well which are worth mentioning. First of all, in and outside the binary of social significance and artistic quality, the dyad of *mei*, beauty, and *zhen*, truthfulness, appears quite frequently. This is not surprising, considering that *zhen*, *shan* and *mei* remain central categories in China’s literary thought today as well as constitutive principles of literary creation. It is assumed by several commentators *zhen* has been overlooked by pure literature, and its restoration is part of the take of migrant workers’ and subaltern literatures on social responsibility. In this sense, migrant workers’ literature, as a form of uncultivated writing from below, is often seen as a return to the most primordial, original and spontaneous meaning of

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<sup>92</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Dagong wenxue*, 243–244.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*, 32.

<sup>94</sup> Zeng Xianlin and Wen Wen, “Lun dagong wenxue.”

literature itself—sometimes pointedly so, but often with clear paternalism. Alongside this, the problem of representativity or ventriloquism pops up repeatedly in the form of discussions over *daiyan* 代言—who speaks on behalf of whom. And the problem concerns not only the practice itself, but should be turned to the scholarship itself. Critics’ positionality often go unnoticed, but they generally read this literature from the point of view of the urban upper class, expressing surprise for something they would not have expected to emerge, marvelling at the ability of literature to reveal unknown parts of society that have always been there, but have been overlooked. An example of this mindset comes from Liu Dong, who openly acknowledges the privileged position of “us researchers in our warm rooms at Peking University” (我们北大那些温室里的研究生), and suggests to read workers’ poems are living proofs of the existences of subjects who are at our side but are often subsumed: “there are also a bunch of lives completely identical and equal to ours who live for real just next to us—not only on the level of their biological perpetuation, but also in its most noble sense; not only in the abstraction of demographic statistics, but also in a unique experience of life!” (还另有一些完全相同和完全平等的生命，就在我们很近的地方活生生地活着——不仅在生理延续的层面上活着，而且在生命尊严的意义上活着；不仅在抽象的人口统计中活着，而且在独特的人生体验中活着！).<sup>95</sup>

Here we seem to have come full circle, so to speak. Social significance and artistic quality do not have to be two mutually exclusive properties. On the contrary, they can coexist, provided that the meaning of “artistic quality,” i.e. aesthetics, is not taken for granted but unpacked as a historical product that can vary according to different needs of different social groups. How they are framed in the commentary indeed exposes different takes on the larger themes that stem from workers’ literature to invest Chinese society at large in its present historical phase. Evidently, it is also crucial to assess where such critiques come from, and question commentators’ positionality as well. More

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<sup>95</sup> Liu Dong, “Jianmin de gechang,” 18.

interestingly for the purposes of our discussion, the recurrence of certain problems, starting from the uneasy relationship of art and society, suggests that we may also be seeing a continuity between older workers' literature and migrant workers' literature. Of course, we are dealing with a working class in transformation under tremendous historical changes that dramatically affected its position in society. One of the effects of these changes has been to diversify it internally, and that had inevitable reflections on the forms of its literary expression as well. Migrant workers'/*dagong* literature is itself only a part, although the majority, of post-1980s workers' literature. The task is then to unpack the basic characteristics of the phenomenon also beyond the taxonomic boundaries drawn by actors according to certain agendas, and grasp its discontinuities along with its essential traits that have remain unaltered through history.

### *Chapter Three.* *Picun, the Chants in the Cracks of the City*

After a general overview of the theoretical questions and historical discussions that accompanied the evolution of workers' literature in China, up to its most recent incarnation out of the pen or keyboard of rural–urban migrant labourers, this chapter will now narrow the focus on the overarching case study of the dissertation, namely the Picun Literature Group. Essentially, the chapters moves from the assumption that the cultural practice of the Picun Literature Group, based on the interrelation between three basic sets of agents, namely activists, authors and mediators, constitutes a literary mode of production (LMP). It is useful to remind here that, in Eagleton's conceptualisation, the LMP indicates the “unity of certain forces and social relations of literary production in a particular social formation.”<sup>1</sup> Although the concept usually denotes literary production in a socio-cultural formation at a certain historical moment, multiple LMPs exist synchronically in the same society, “mutually ‘disjunct’ because each stands in distinct and particular relation to a specific social class.”<sup>2</sup> Every LMP “is constituted by structures of production, distribution, exchange and consumption” that can be unique, while at the same time maintaining “a complex contradictory unity with other LMPs,” including the dominant one.<sup>3</sup>

The concept is interesting and helpful because it considers the influence played by a whole array of forces beyond authors themselves in determining the creation, distribution and reception of a work of literature, and captures the dialectic relation between the group's internal dynamics and its relation with the wider cultural scene—and the establishment.

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<sup>1</sup> Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 47.

First of all, the chapter will provide the necessary context about the Migrant Workers Home (*Gongyou zhi jia* 工友之家), the NGO-like organisation that runs most of the cultural activities in Picun. They are the activists. The chapter does not aim to offer a complete presentation of Picun, nor will it go deep into all and each of the activities carried out by the Migrant Workers Home, like Eric Florence and Dong Yuxiang have done in other excellent contributions.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it will provide all the necessary information to understand the milieu that gave rise to the literature group. In particular, the centrality of the community-based approach of the Home will be underlined in order to assess the spatial dimension where the group was born, has developed, and continues to base itself on. As opposed to other worker writers and poets, who mostly operated on an individual basis or forged ties based on their place of work, such as Guangdong, here we are talking about a relatively small and compact community, with very different dynamics. The discussion will then move to the literature group itself, analysed in its history, composition, and understanding of literary creation, taking into considerations some of the authors' personal motivations for taking part in the activities of the group, as well as the role played by mediators in connecting the group and Beijing's cultural establishment. Finally, the chapter will explore the publications established and ran by the group—and the Migrant Workers Home before it, concentrating in particular on the gradual evolution from a distribution primarily restricted to the community itself to an attempt at reaching out to the larger scene of migrant workers' literature, and the implications behind this choice. Throughout the chapter, the original concepts of *new workers* and *new workers' literature*, elaborated in Picun, will be introduced and discussed.

The title of this chapter has been explicitly inspired by the title of a poem by Bai Lianchun 白连春, a migrant worker poet who has been operative since the 1980s, “Chengshi fengxi li de xiangtu” 城市縫隙里的乡土 (Our Native Soil in the Cracks of the City). The practice of the Picun

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<sup>4</sup> Florence, *Struggling around “dagong,”* Dong Yuxiang, “Repoliticizing the depoliticized.”

Literature Group is clearly urban. It offers a unique outlook on the transformations of the Chinese city in general and Beijing in particular over the last forty years on the part of individuals who have been excluded from the main advantages of the city they have physically built. At the same time, it articulates its practitioners' efforts to achieve their right to culture, as well as to the city. They emerge not just as manpower to be discarded once the job is complete, but as creative minds able to create a meaningful perspective on society and history. The title, however, has been slightly changed from Bai Lianchun's poem given that the basic idea of *new workers* and *new workers' literature* is precisely to claim that migrant workers are full urban citizens, and not just rural immigrants—not rural soil in the cracks of the city, but instead a group of individuals that remains invisible in the social texture of the urban social space.

### **3.1. Community: Migrant Workers Home (*Gongyou zhi jia*)**

The village of Picun is located in the eastern outskirts of Beijing in its present-day extension, about six kilometres from Capital Airport, closer to the sixth ring of the city's beltways than the already remote fifth. Most of the population of the village is made up of rural–urban migrants. The reason for this is partly its close proximity to what was formerly an industrial area, and the cheaper prices of rents, shops, restaurants and other services. More recently, the demolition of the nearby neighbourhood of Dongpo has also favoured the arrival of new migrant residents, with a resulting increase in rents. In fact, rents are the main source of income for the population of *hukou*-holders (*huji renkou* 户籍人口), approximately 3,000 people. The figure of migrant residents, statistically classified as outsiders (*wailai renkou* 外来人口), rises to roughly 30,000.

Picun is considered a *chengzhongcun* 城中村, literally a village-in-the-city, although sociologically the term is often translated into urban village. The definition refers to rural settlements that were gradually absorbed by the city's expansion and eventually integrated in the

urban system. Traces of their rural past remain mainly in the common sight of small farming fields, or pots, shabby roads, and old buildings that strike the eye for their difference with respect to the skyscrapers found downtown. This type of urban expansion intercepted the need for a growth in the offer of lodgings following the growth in demand on the part of migrants, barred from access to public subsidies due to their lack of urban *hukou*, not to mention the costly private real estate market.<sup>5</sup> Houses, however, are often low-level, with few rooms, often co-habited, hygienic services are public (though the situation is changing with an improvement in such kind of services, particularly in fast-developing cities like Beijing itself).<sup>6</sup> Historically urban villages, in the south and the north alike, have been one of the main—although not exclusive—destinations of migrants looking for an accommodation. They are therefore a central element of the social transition in China’s urban areas, and also a key component of migrants’ living conditions and cultural imagination. The transformation of major Chinese cities’ socio- and geographic layout following the massive income of rural migrants has been so profound that Wang Yaping, Wang Yangling and Wu Jiansheng have pointed out that

The emergence of these semi-urbanized spaces and population has also restored some characteristics of pre-communist urban divisions in China. Modern business and commercial districts, occupied by official residents and linked closely with the global economic system, form a sharp contrast with informal and poor residential areas represented by urban villages.<sup>7</sup>

The state is trying to overcome such divisions by levelling major cities to middle-class standards and dislocating lower classes to smaller cities, with the promise of easier access to household registration there, and simultaneously reproducing and redirecting the cheap workforce

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<sup>5</sup> Zheng Siqi, Long Fengjie, Fan, Cindy and Gu Yizhen, “Urban Villages in China.”

<sup>6</sup> Wu Fulong, “Housing in Chinese Urban Villages.”

<sup>7</sup> Wang Yaping, Wang Yangling and Wu Jiansheng, “Urbanization and Informal Development,” 958.

of rural–urban migrants to lesser-tier centres now undertaking urban development plans. The New-Type Urbanisation Plan (*xinxiing dushihua jihua* 新型都市化计划), adopted in March 2014, operates a nationwide rationalisation of urban development in this direction.<sup>8</sup> One the forms of this “gentrification with Chinese characteristics,” as it has been called,<sup>9</sup> was the beautification (*meihua* 美化) campaign started in Beijing in spring 2017, that resulted in the expulsion of several migrants and lower-income people from the city centres to suburbs. The most dramatic effect of this process occurred in November 2017. On 18 November, fire destroyed a warehouse in Daxing district that acted both as dormitory and workshop operated by migrant workers, killing 19 people. Citing safety reasons, city authorities evicted tens of thousands of migrant from the city. Images of migrants forced out of their lodgings and crowding the streets in the cold Beijing winter with their belongings generated sympathy and protest.<sup>10</sup> Places such as Picun were also threatened as well, but the local administration, activists and citizens responded by rushing up a general renovation of the area, improving its safety conditions and outer appeal. Notably, then the cynical term that was used in mainstream media to describe migrants was *diduan renkou* 低端人口, low-end population.

All this bears particular implications for the way individuals who live at the margins of a city increasingly global and technologically smart will decipher, imagine, and represent such social space, and their own positioning within it. Using the category of social space means conceiving of the city as a network of social relations, characterised not only by their materiality, but also by their symbolic significance. How subjects are positioned within these relations (which is of course directly related to their social being, class, occupation, level of income, etc.) affects their representation of the space as a whole. Henri Lefebvre explains that “Social space is produced and

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<sup>8</sup> Chen Mingxing, Liu Weidong, Lu Dadao, “Challenged and the Way Forward.”

<sup>9</sup> Liu Fengbao et al, “Progress of Gentrification Research.”

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Lin, “Evictions,” Song Jiani, Zhang Shuchi and Li Qiaochu, “Beijing Evictions.”



reproduced in connection with the forces of production and with the relations of production.”<sup>11</sup> As a result, social space is not always exactly superimposed to physical, material spaces or administrative divisions, nor is one social space inflexibly divided from another one. “[W]e are confronted not by one social space but by many,” continues Lefebvre, “indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces,” that “*interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another*,”<sup>12</sup> in a way that is extremely remindful of sci-fi writer Hao Jingfang’s “folding Beijing” mentioned in the Introduction. Given the array of contradictions inherent to social spaces, reinforced by the peculiarities of certain spaces—such as urban villages—where individuals with similar backgrounds tend to concentrate, Wang Hongzhe 王洪喆 and Qiu Linchuan 邱林川 hold spaces as ideal sites for the experimentation of identity practices, despite their increasing commercialisation. Getting hold of a space is therefore the essential precondition for establishing a collective practice of cultural fruition and production.<sup>13</sup>

A similar reasoning apparently motivated three young migrant workers to move to Picun in 2005. Sun Heng 孙恒 worked in a private school for migrant workers’ children (where *private* refers to *minban* 民办, literally “people-managed,” i.e. not in formal state education, often directed at individuals without a local *hukou*). Xu Duo 许多 was a street musician and made ends meet with casual jobs. Wang Dezhi 王德志 similarly made a living out of work in restaurants and shops. All three had moved to Beijing towards the end of the 1990s, and there their destinies crossed thanks to their shared passion for music and their willingness to act to improve the cultural and material life of other migrant workers like them. This inspiration topped on their motivation to escape the grim fate of a dull and unsatisfactory life and pursue their musical passions. To this end, they established

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<sup>11</sup> Lefebvre, “The Production of Space,” 77.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*: 86.

<sup>13</sup> Wang Hongzhe and Qiu Linchuan, “Kongjian, jiqiao, yu shengyin,” 29, 33.

the Migrant Worker Youth Art Troupe (*Dagong qingnian yishutuan* 打工青年艺术图案) on 1 May 2002. The date and name were evidently not casual. They were both indicative of the mission that the three of the imagined for the group. Music was meant to be the ground for a cultural activity aimed at involving other migrant workers and produce a concrete impact on their lives. Simultaneously, music should be a way to make workers' voices heard as a social group, to tell their story and reveal their reality. Profits would have been used to start mutual aid activities oriented at migrant workers.

All these goals were stated in the introduction to a booklet brought out by the group in July 2004. The publication itself is very interesting. Titled *Dasheng chang* 大声唱 (*Sing Out Loud*), it displayed a typical format remindful of little, red-covered Red Guard publications from the Cultural Revolution, made with cheap material, whose tiny dimensions made them ideal to be carried around (Figure 1). It was divided into six sections, namely “Qunzhong aiguo geming gequ” 群众爱国革命歌曲 (Mass Revolutionary and Patriotic Songs), introduced by the PRC National Anthem and *The Internationale*, and with classical songs such as “Shehuizhuyi hao” 社会主义好 (Socialism Is Good) and “Meiyou Gongchandang jiu meiyou xin Zhongguo” 没有共产党就没有新中国 (Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China); “Youxiu minyao” 优秀民谣 (Fine Folk Songs), opened by the all-time famous “Dongfang hong” 东方红 (The East Is Red); “Youxiu shaonian ertong gequ” 优秀少年儿童歌曲 (Fine Children's Songs); “Youxiu shuqing gequ” 优秀抒情歌曲 (Fine Lyrical Songs), which included “Nanniwan” 南泥湾 (Nanniwan); “Xin xiangcun jianshe zhinong gequ” 新农村建设支农歌曲 (Songs from the New Rural Construction and Farmers' Support); and finally, “Xin gongren—dagong gequ” 新工人——打工歌曲 (New Workers/Migrant Workers' Songs), by the troupe itself. Finding political songs from the Mao era in this booklet is not surprising. In fact, songs like “Dongfang hong” and “Nanniwan” can be associated to three different dimensions, namely folk music (as they were composed as or readapted from folk songs), socialist

politics (therefore resonant with official working-class culture), and even contemporaneity, given that some of them have not only remained popular, but have also been rearranged by composers in recent times.<sup>14</sup> The concept of songs for and by workers was greatly expanded to include tunes that were popular among workers (and peasants) in a certain period of time, or more generally associated with them. So states the introduction:

劳动者创造世界，劳动创造美，劳动最光荣。

昨天，我们用我们的双手、血汗和智慧盖起了高楼大厦，建起了宽阔大街、桥梁；

今天，我们同样也要创造我们的精神文化生活；

我们不但要工作、要学习、要劳动，我们还要大声高唱——自己的歌！

Labourers create the world, labourers create beauty, labour is the most glorious.

Yesterday we used our bare hands, sweat, blood and intelligence to build up palaces and skyscrapers, make streets, boulevards and bridges;

Today, we also want to create our spiritual and cultural life;

We don't just want to work, study and labour, we also want to sing out loud—our songs!

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<sup>14</sup> Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*, Ch. 2.

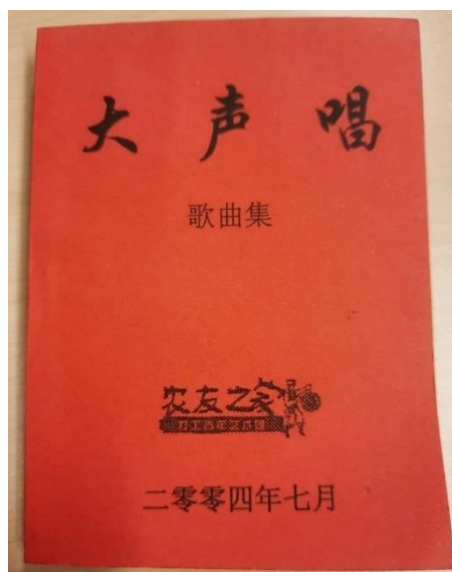


Figure 1 - The "Dasheng chang" booklet.

As will become evident throughout the chapter, the goal of producing a culture that migrant workers could claim as their own—proclaimed her with boastful grandiloquence—has remained the *fil rouge* of all the activities carried out by the troupe (and its spin-offs) ever since, although it has evolved and has been perfected along different lines.

The Art Troupe started holding events at places with a high concentration of migrant workers, like construction sites and urban peripheries. Soon it attracted considerable attention, especially from intellectuals and artists interested in social causes. Sun Heng recalled that even the owner of the record company that the group initially associated with, a migrant worker himself, was deeply moved by their songs and gave them a preferential price.<sup>15</sup> Their first album, *Tianxia dagong shi yi jia* 天下打工是一家 (*Migrant Workers Under the Sky Are All One Family*), a phrase that was to become their most distinctive slogan, came out on 10 September 2004. Thanks to the profits made by its sales, concerts, and other donations, they decided to open a centre to provide cultural activities and other kinds of services, first of all assistance, to migrant workers. To this end, they moved from Xiaojiahe, where they had already established a similar group, called Nongyou zhi jia

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<sup>15</sup> Sun Heng, "Jueding qu xiangcun."

农友之家, literally Peasant Friends Home, and settled in Picun in 2005. The choice fell on the urban village because of its high concentration of rural migrants, and because the gentrification process that were already being set in motion pushed lower-income individuals away from the centre.<sup>16</sup> There, they bought an old farmer's house with an inner courtyard, and renamed the centre Gongyou zhi jia 工友之家, officially translated as Migrant Workers Home (full name Gongyou zhi jia wenhua fazhan zhongxin 工友之家文化发展中心, Migrant Workers Home Cultural Development Centre). The word *gongyou* literally means *workmate*, and, according to Yu Chunsen, denotes a form of self-identification on the part of migrant workers who promote solidarity in the city, although “differentiated from the traditional working class by the precarity of their employment.”<sup>17</sup>

The opening of a self-run, community-based space by and for migrant workers meant to symbolically suggest that while migrant belong nowhere, suspended between “a city where they cannot settle and a countryside they cannot go back to” (待不下的城市, 回不去的乡村), according to Lü Tu's 吕途 captivating formula,<sup>18</sup> they may have a home here. The choice of the word *jia*, home, reinforces the feeling of solidarity and connects to the troupe's predicament that all Chinese migrant workers are “one family”, and should therefore overcome regional differences in favour of mutual help. One of the first structures that were built with the profits made by the group was the Tongxin Experimental School (*Tongxin shiyan xuexiao* 同心实验学校). As mentioned before, these privately-run schools provide primary education to migrant children who would otherwise not be able to access better public schools due to their lack of *hukou*, and therefore be forced to either return to the countryside, where educational facilities are shabby, or face partial

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<sup>16</sup> Huang Chuanhui, *Generation Now*, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Yu Chunsen, “Gongyou,” 37.

<sup>18</sup> Lü Tu, *Zhongguo xin gongren: wenhua yu mingyun*, 2015.

illiteracy. While these schools for migrant children are not immune from other structural problems, namely the fact that most of them are unofficial and therefore do not enable students to access higher levels of education, their advantages are obvious.<sup>19</sup> The Tongxin school opened on 21 August 2005, and now it sees an average participation of 500 students. It is not the only project aimed at children: for example, a series of little books called *Liudong de xinsheng* 流动的歌声 (*The Sound of Floating Hearts*), carrying migrant children's drawings, pictures and stories, was published for some years after 2007. Further, the Tongxin Fair Shop (*Tongxin huhui shangdian* 同心互惠商店) was opened in 2006, based on second-hand goods or donations from wealthier individuals, that were sold at affordable prices. Outside of the Tongxin network properly, the activists have also opened a Workers' University (*Laodong daxue* 劳动大学) for adults in Zhangxinzhuan, with classes on topics that include working-class history from a global perspective and legal rights of labourers according to China's law.<sup>20</sup>

The structures for mutual help introduced above were founded alongside other cultural activities that carry the Art Troupe's goal of creating migrant workers' culture on in other artistic sectors. Among the first to be established were a musical training group, with Sun Heng and Xu Duo as its principal instructors, and a group on cinema, animated also by Wang Dezhi, who has made a number of amateur films on migrant workers' lives and Picun itself. A theatre and drama group was also among the first to be formed, and so far its most accomplished piece is *We2s. The Labour Exchange Market* (*Women2s. Laodong jiaoliu shichang* 我们 2s. 劳动交流市场), a drama produced in a cooperation among several groups in and beyond Picun, an in-depth exploration of crucial issues such as the role of labour and labourers in China, also questioning its supposed

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<sup>19</sup> Lu Wang, "The Marginality of Migrant Children"; Min Yu and Crowley, "The Discursive Politics"; Vomeri, *The Education of Migrant Workers' Children*.

<sup>20</sup> Connery, "New Workers' Culture."

glory,<sup>21</sup> which is taken for granted also in Picun's slogan, "Labour is most glorious" (*laodong zui guangrong* 劳动最光荣)—albeit in a critical, provocative way. The established political vocabulary of the state is adopted here to promote workers' empowerment and rights, as it does not fail to pointing out its contradiction with the dismal accounts of labourers' lives produced by the Art Troupe and its affiliated groups. Finally, there is the literature group, that will be expanded in the next section. All these structures, stable and fluid alike, constitute the infrastructure that, according to Wang and Qiu, "is the basic material condition for the formation of culture, especially because they can meet the cultural needs of the workers' community in a more stable and prolonged way" (基礎設施是文化得已形成的最基本物質條件, 特別由於它可以更穩定地、定期地滿足工人社區的文化需求).<sup>22</sup>

While these groups, although open to virtually anyone's participation, combined creation and fruition, other activities were launched to reach a wider public. Three editions of a Migrant Workers' Culture and Art Festival (*dagong wenhua yishu jie* 打工文化艺术节) were held in January and October 2009 and September 2010, mainly with exhibitions by the Art Troupe, but also readings of poetry, with the participation, among others, of Xu Qiang, one of the most famous migrant worker poets we met several times in chapter Two. At the end of each festival a booklet of *Minyao · shige zuopinji* 民谣 · 诗歌作品集 (*Collection of Folk Songs and Poems*) was published, presenting songs from the Troupe, poems, and translations of foreign song lyrics. After the festival, a Migrant Workers' Spring Festival Gala (*dagong chunwan* 打工春晚) was held, somewhat of a subaltern response to the mainstream televised gala. The latest incarnation of such public events in Picun has been called "Labourers' Songs and Poems" (*laodongzhe de shi yu ge* 劳动者的诗与歌), held annually in September. The format continues to be similar to the previous one, with readings of

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<sup>21</sup> Iovene, "Utopias of Unalienated Labor."

<sup>22</sup> Wang Hongzhe and Qiu Linchuan, "Kongjian, yishu, yu shengyin," 32.

poems interspersed with songs by the Troupe (notably, the 6th instalment of the event, on 8 January 2022, was held at the library of the Lu Xun Museum instead of Picun). In addition to these festivals, Picun has also hosted events for specialists or on specific topics. On 26 May 2010, for example, the Troupe held a performance for Foxconn workers who had committed suicide (*daonian Fushikang gongyou minyao yiyuan* 悼念富士康工友民谣义演). On 3 January 2009, the first Migrant Workers' Art and Culture Festival wrapped up with a forum on labour culture (*laodong wenhua luntan* 劳动文化论坛), and a larger symposium on workers' poetry (*gongren shige taolunhui* 工人诗歌讨论会) was held in February 2015, whose minutes can be read in the appendix of Qin Xiaoyu's *Wo de shipian* anthology.

Culture is not only a matter of producing music, poetry, or other forms of art that migrant workers can identify with. It is also an active rethinking of workers' place in society, as well as their history as a class. Producing forms of culture that they can claim as their own, besides being a clear expression of agency, is seen as a fundamental step towards the reforging of a subjecthood. "Without our culture, we have no history; without our history, we have no future" (没有我们的文化, 就没有我们的历史; 没有我们的历史, 就没有我们的将来): so reads the slogan that accompanies some of the group's recent publications and that welcome visitors to the Migrant Workers' Culture and Art Museum (*dagong wenhua yishu bowuguan* 打工文化艺术博物馆), probably the most attractive and successful establishment of Migrant Workers Home.

The museum was founded on 1 May 2008, thanks to the support from the Cultural Bureau of Beijing's Chaoyang District, where Picun is located, and the village committee, as well as non-institutional actors, primarily OXFAM Hong Kong. The date was not incidental, as it marked the thirtieth anniversary of the start of Reform in 1978. In Sun Heng's idea, the museum's most basic purpose was precisely to break the monopoly of "the elite and bourgeois discourse" (精英和资本的



话语).<sup>23</sup> Not incidentally, the slogan on the wall of the main hall reads “Recording workers’ [cultural] history, respect for the value of labour” (记录工人文化历史, 倡导劳动价值尊重). In fact, the central section of the museum is precisely focused on the history of migrant labour since the foundation of the PRC, presented from migrant workers’ point of view. The histogram found right beside the entrance of the main hall (Figure 2) summarises the museum’s take on history. The vertical axis shows the growth in numbers of rural–urban migrants, and the horizontal one displays key years in the process. Unsurprisingly, it starts with 1978, and the following decade is titled “hard mobility” (*jiannan de liudong* 艰难的流动). Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Trip of 1992, when the retired but still powerful leader pushed for a revamp of market reforms, is in the early stage of the “high wave of migration” (*dagong rechao* 打工热潮), that continues until 2003. In March of that year, a young migrant, Sun Zhigang 孙志刚, was arrested by the police after failing to produce his temporary residence permit, and died under unclear circumstances in the infamous “custody and repatriation system” (*shourong qiansong* 收容遣送) that was in place in cities. Public indignation led to the abolishment of the system in August, a fact that the graphic describes as a liberation for the body and mind (身心获得解放). The increased possibility to obtain full urban citizenship after the end of the arbitrary system is considered by the museum as the shift from a floating condition to that of “new citizens, new workers” (*xin shimin, xin gongren* 新市民, 新工人). Other events following 2003 are the election of three migrant workers to the National People’s Congress in 2008, the 2010 Honda strike and suicides at Foxconn between 2010 and 2013. Other “minor” events listed on top include former Premier Wen Jiabao’s 温家宝 personal interest in the problem of unpaid salaries in the construction sector, and the approval of the new Labour Contract Law in 2008 to “harmonise” employment relations, more on paper than in actuality.

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<sup>23</sup> Lü Tu, *Zhongguo xin gongren: mishi yu jueqi*, 8.

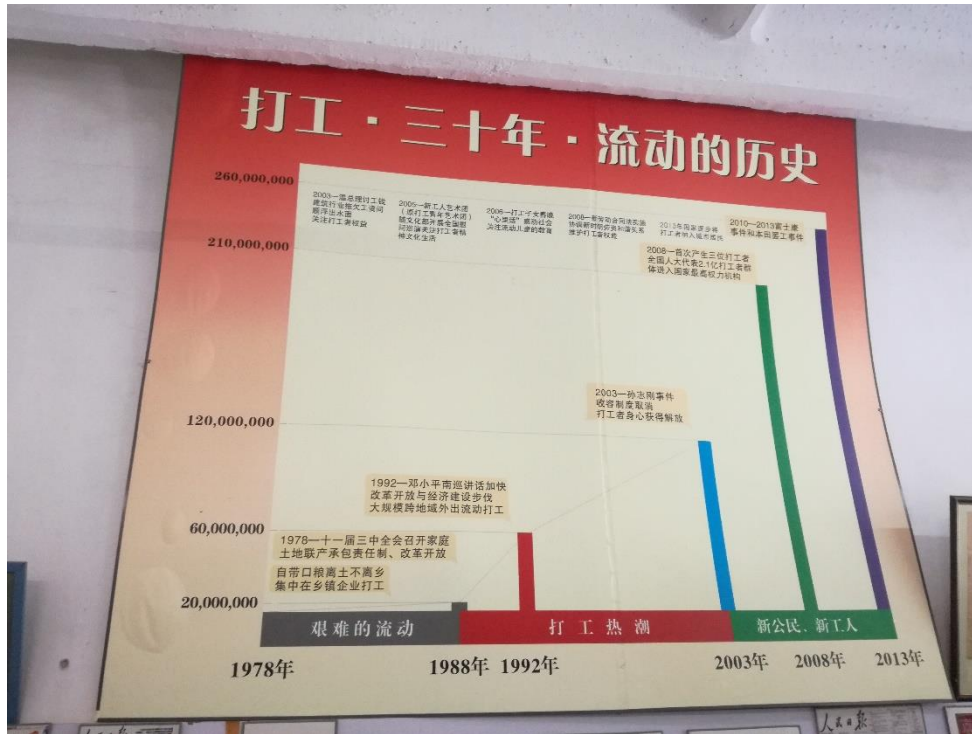


Figure 2 - The graphic on migrant labour history at the Picun Migrant Workers' Culture and Art Museum.

Consistent with the scheme, the rest of the main hall presents a series of sections that follow the evolution of migrant labour in China historically and thematically. Each historical section is introduced by a national event, and proceeds by illustrating the impact it had on rural areas and migrant labourers, including display cabinets with various historical “relics”. Not surprisingly, the first section on the early PRC (*jianguo chuqi* 建国初期) presents the text of the CCP Central Committee’s document that established people’s communes in August 1958, followed by the regulations passed in the 1950s to discourage disorderly rural–urban mobility and institute the *hukou* (with a “commune member card,” *huiyuanzheng* 会员证, in the display cabinet). Then it proceeds with the disbandment of the communes as the precondition for the later migration from rural areas (*nongcun gaige* 农村改革), the early movement from villages into local towns, thus abandoning farming without completely leaving the native area (*litu bu lixiang* 离土不离乡), and then the vast labour migration of wave-like proportions (*wugongchao chuxian* 务工潮出现). The latter stage is the overarching context of other sections in the hall, like plaques informing on

regulations and the documents needed by migrants to legally enter in the cities and the different typologies of temporary residence permits (*zanzhuzheng* 暂住证) that were in place at the time (the section is called “administrative system,” *guanli zhidu* 管理制度). The section culminates with the official notice of the Beijing municipality announcing the suppression of the “custody and repatriation” system. The larger section is dedicated to the “life of hardships” (*jianxin* 艰辛) and presents a variety of exhibitions, including pictures of the crowded and low-quality lodgings of migrant workers, military compound-like industrial premises, and other adverse situations. A panel is entirely dedicated to pictures and drawings of work-related wounds (*gongshang* 工伤), mostly chopped fingers and limbs, some accompanied by written pieces detailing the circumstances of these happenings. Other plaques denounce violence by the police or show acts of “show suicides,” a practice carried out in China to demand salaries, among other causes.<sup>24</sup> A nearby section on “important events (*zhongyao shijian* 重要事件) includes Sun Zhigang, worker activist Zhang Haichao 张海超 and his struggle for fair compensations to co-workers who had contracted pneumoconiosis, and Wen Jiabao’s much-publicised action to help a migrant worker obtain his unpaid salary. Exhibitions are supplemented by an array of material objects, such as firing letters and a whole display of payrolls, and a considerable amount of data and information, such as percentages of unpaid salaries, distributions of migrant workers according to different kinds of lodgings, and so on. Other halls expand the thematic scope of the museum by displaying the cultural and social activities carried out by the Migrant Workers Home, and samples of artworks produced by affiliated groups. A flag with the logo and name of *Dagong shiren*, with the signatures of a dozen poets on it, is among the highlights.

In a way, then, the museum is a manifesto of the Home’s activities and purposes, but it is also something more. Essays by Junxi Qian and Eric Florence as well as by van Crevel frame the

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<sup>24</sup> Hillenbrand, “The Cliffhangers.”

museum as a powerful “bottom-up,” or grass-roots, alternative to the edulcorated depiction of workers’ conditions found in other state-run labour museums.<sup>25</sup> Zhjiying Lian and Gillian Oliver also see the museum as a community archive, registering the history of the social group it is addressed to in an autonomous way.<sup>26</sup> In fact, while the model audience (to whom the museum is addressed) is clear, to query the composition of the empirical audience, i.e. the individuals who actually visit the museum, is another interesting issue that would benefit from further studies. The visitors’ book from February to September 2019 (when I had the opportunity to browse through it as part of my fieldwork) contained a majority of university students, although many other signers did not indicate their occupational state. The internet, word of mouth and general “news” (*xinwen* 新闻) were tipped as the most common channels through it signers had come to know of the museum (*dezhi fangshi* 得知方式). It can be speculated that most local visitors do not even sign the visitors’ book. The main area of the museum visited by workers themselves with more frequency is the library just beside the entrance, where they can borrow books or sit down and read. The choice is quite vast and diverse: one finds classics from Chinese and European literatures, more recent fiction, including popular literature (Dan Brown and J. K. Rowling stand out), anthologies of foreign literature, Lu Xun’s collected works, books by philosophers and thinkers (Laozi 老子, Nietzsche, Locke, Freud) and politics (Mao, Deng), the Bible next to the *Chajing* 茶经 (*Classic of Tea*), issues of literary journals (such as *Duzhe* 读者, *Reader*, and *Dangdai* 当代, *Contemporary*), and a whole section with children’s literature. In the last analysis, attracting visitors from the city, especially the intelligentsia, and favouring participation by migrant workers and other Picun residents are not mutually exclusive. Qian and Florence rightly observe that the museum

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<sup>25</sup> Qian and Florence, “Migrant Worker Museums”; van Crevel, “Debts.”

<sup>26</sup> Lian and Oliver, “Sustainability.”

offers a powerful counternarrative to the framing of migrant bodies as no more than part and parcel of the accumulation and circuit of capital. It, on the contrary, has to be considered as part of a larger politics of visibility and recognition as partaking in the larger dynamics of “inclusive representation” or “representation through subjectivization.” Exposing labour exploitation and experiences of working, living and consuming under curtailed citizenship, the museum serves as a “space of hope” for migrant activists who claim for fair evaluation of migrant labour, welfare protection from the state, dignity of labouring bodies, and paramount of all, collective voice and identity.<sup>27</sup>

In this sense, the museum involves other migrant workers in the shaping of their own collective identity and class subjecthood (not only in the actual setting up of the exhibitions, but also by offering a narrative that other workers can identify themselves with and use to rethink their own position in society), but it also reaches out to visitors from other backgrounds to spread this self-representation. However, the first element is central and founding, and latter is consequential and ancillary, at least in the founders’ intentions—and this is one of the museum’s peculiarities.

These activities show the Art Troupe’s intention to promote migrant workers’ appropriation of the means of cultural creation. Such appropriation is not only grounded in the already significant purpose of re-humanising workers themselves as three-dimensional beings, extracting them from the dullness and de-humanisation of a life spent on the assembly line or other workplaces, and facilitating their access to cultural access and production. It is also a way for workers themselves to raise their voices and produce their own narratives on their position in history and society. The establishment of a place called Home responds to the desires of younger generations of migrant workers who have no emotional attachment to or significant working experience on the land, and therefore bear higher expectations to permanently settle down in the city.<sup>28</sup> Simultaneously, activists began to question their own identification as *dagong*, *nongmingong*, or migrant workers in general.

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<sup>27</sup> Qian and Florence, “Migrant Worker Museums,” 2.

<sup>28</sup> Huang Chuanhui, *Generation Now*.

Wang Dezhi's issue with *nongmingong* is that it implies a dual identity, but migrant workers nowadays have no farming experience nor an interest to acquire it, and they are urban citizens through and through.<sup>29</sup> Moving from this reasoning, in the late 2000s the group came up with the idea of *xin gongren* 新工人, or new workers, and renamed itself New Workers' Art Troupe (*Xin gongren yishutuan* 新工人艺术团), dropping the *dagong*. The *new* here has nothing to do with the "socialist new man" whose creation was pursued by the Mao-era party-state. Instead, the shift reflected an intention to "consciously promot[e] a new working class culture."<sup>30</sup>

For Wang Dezhi, *xin gongren* is a concept that denotes urban workers characterised by a rural origin, lack of urban *hukou*, and generally low formal education.<sup>31</sup> In his opinion, while *nongmingong* is pejorative and inadequate, *dagong* is unsatisfactory in its extreme vagueness and ambiguity (referred to in chapter Two), that mixes up working individuals from very different positions in production relations. The same idea is held by Lü Tu, a sociologist and anthropologist closely associated with Home activists, who runs the Workers' University. In her book, *Zhongguo xin gongren: mishi yu jueqi* 中国新工人：迷失与崛起 (*Chinese New Workers: Loss and Rise*), she remarks that what sets new workers apart from the old is that "many of the things [they] fight to achieve had already been obtained and are currently being lost by SOE workers" ([他们]争取的很多东西是国企工人曾经得到过然后又正在失去的). Yet, they are still workers, and should proudly claim the historical characteristics that come with this identification, absent in *dagong*: "The word *workers* has been historically conferred a certain sense of subjectivity, and has represented a leading position in society" (工人这个词从历史上讲被赋予了一定的主体性的含义, 它代表了一种主人翁的社会地位). And finally, the *new* embodies a political claim, "an impetus

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> Qiu and Wang, "Working-Class Cultural Spaces," 144.

<sup>31</sup> Interview in Beijing on 28 November 2019.

and a desire to create a new type of working class and a new type of social culture” (一种渴求创造新型工人阶级和新型社会文化的冲动).<sup>32</sup>

The functions of Picun as a social space for community-based cultural production can be summarised along three points: foster workers’ cultural consciousness, enlarge with society at large from a workers’ perspective, and sustain acceptable relations with local government. In fact, while the cultural production sponsored by the Home takes pride in its autonomy from state institutions, and the political relevance of the shift to *new workers* is obvious from the passages quoted above, the Home’s practice remains nonconfrontational. According to Wang Jing, nonconfrontationalism is a form of activism that discourages open critique in favour of other strategies that avoid conflict, such as “pulling the strings of influential relationships within the system to facilitate a deal.”<sup>33</sup> Relations with the Picun village committee and Chaoyang district authorities have been fluctuating, but overall good. Although the museum proudly displays an official notice sent by the village committee to Sun Heng in July 2012 asking him to vacate the school premises on grounds of “contract violations,” the Home has received considerable financial assistance from the Chaoyang District Cultural Bureau. The Tongxin centre, already the recipient of a title as one of the best volunteer organisations in Beijing in 2005 by a jury made up of municipal bodies and Communist Youth League officials, established its CCP branch in June 2018 (not incidentally after the 2017 incident). State rhetoric about the success of the Reform policy and the China dream (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦) has been adopted during public events. Wang and Qiu advance two possible interpretations for this balance of forces: one sees the Chaoyang district interested in portraying itself as an advanced and global area, hence its favourable treatment of Picun, while another one has it more willing to allowing the Home’s public existence primarily to monitor its activities.<sup>34</sup> What is

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<sup>32</sup> Lü Tu, *Zhongguo xin gongren: mishi yu jueqi*, 5–6.

<sup>33</sup> Wang Jing, *The Other Digital China*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Wang Hongzhe and Qiu Linchuan, “Kongjian, jishi, yu shengyin,” 56.

certain is that intelligent negotiations are what has allowed the Home and its groups to continue their activities so far, particularly escaping the wave of evictions in the winter of 2017–2018, which provided the perfect excuse to clear out this area of the city. In the context of present-day China, a self-managed niche of cultural activity may be as far as one is allowed to go, at least legally.

But this may not be enough, and other structural problems make the future of the Home uncertain. Although between the late 2000s and early 2010s its activists were convinced that migrants would eventually be able to settle down in the city, and built their artistic activities to reach that end, now some are no longer sure. Constantly decreasing possibilities for migrant labourers in an ultra-developed city like Beijing, especially after the 2017 incident and the strong gentrification of its poor neighbourhoods and remote areas, may push some to consider taking advantage of the current plan for rural revitalisation and the development of lesser-tier cities to move there, or try to bring their culture back to rural areas.<sup>35</sup> The *Dadi minyao* 大地民谣 (Country Folk) tours undertaken by the renamed New Workers' Band (*Xin gongren yuetuan* 新工人乐团) from 2017 may have been exploring these possibilities.

## **3.2. Shared space: the literature group**

### *3.2.1. Origins and main activities*

The mix of self-sociology and political claim that foregrounds the shift to *new workers* appears consistent with Home activists' intention to promote workers' subjectivity, as well as with the centrality of cultural production to do so, especially in a complex context such as China's. The activities of Home-affiliated groups acquire a crucial role in this respect. Above all, there is the literature group. It is one of the few collective writing groups organised by migrant workers in

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Wang Dezhi on 28 November 2019, and Liu Chen on 3 December 2019 in Beijing.



present-day China, and quite surely the most successful one in obtaining visibility. At the same time, it is arguably one of the most well-accomplished projects carried out in Picun in general. Most came to know of it in 2017. In April of that year, a memoir written by Fan Yusu 范雨素, a member of the group, went viral on the internet. The intense and vivid tale of a female migrant labourer grappling with countless hardships, from displacement to precarious employment, from an abusive husband to raising two daughters alone, brought the dismal reality of millions of rural–urban migrant workers in China to many readers (Fan, her story and the discourse about it are expanded in chapter Four). Journalists flocked to Picun to learn more about this unlikely “best-selling” author, and the media began to take an interest in the literature group. Although these commentaries often reduced the whole matter to the salvific power of writing and the spiritual comfort that migrants could find in it despite the manifold challenges they have to go through, the group had come under unprecedented attention.<sup>36</sup>

The history of the Picun Literature Group (henceforth PLC) dates back to 2014, when a small group of migrant workers, some of whom were already taking part in the initiatives of the Home as volunteers or audience, voiced the need for a space where they could share their passion of literature and invite experts to spread their knowledge with them. Evidently, then, the original plan was to have a group that could fill the gaps in migrants’ formal education with respect to literary history, rather than a creative writing workshop. Previously, the Home had already set up a “Tongxin Literary Society” (*Tongxin wenxue she* 同心文学社), which apparently never really took off. Its initial proponents included Guo Fulai 郭福来, Fan Yusu, Yuan Wei 苑伟, Wang Chunyu 王春玉 and, above all, Fu Qiuyun 付秋云, better known as Xiao Fu 小付, who still acts as the group’s convenor and factotum, busying herself with arranging its schedule, setting up its activities and digitalising their written productions (recently assisted in this work by other group members and

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<sup>36</sup> E.g. Wu Jingya, “Picun wenxue xiaozu”; Xinhua, “Zhongguo nü nongmingong”; Xu Ming, “Migrant Workers Use Poetry”; Sun Junbin and Wang Qian, “Beijing Picun de ‘Fanyusumen.’”

interns from the city's colleges), alongside her main job at the Home. They were soon joined by others, such as Xu Liangyuan 徐良园 (presented in chapter Six). The group officially opened subscriptions in September 2014. Out of pure coincidence, it was the same month when Xu Lizhi committed suicide. The event loomed as an eerie omen over the group's establishment, although it also makes the power of a cooperative dimension over solitude and isolation even more striking.

Before going operative, the group had sent out a call for volunteers to attract people who would be willing to hold lectures. The first to respond was Zhang Huiyu 张慧瑜, and that was a game changer for himself and the group alike. Holding a PhD in literature from Peking University, where he had been a student of the renowned cultural studies scholar Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, at the time he was research associate at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, working mainly on film studies. However, he maintained scholarly interests on a range of topics that stretched from literary studies to grassroots journalism and cultural production, and culture in the CPC-controlled liberated areas during the 1940s, which he has continued to work on following his transition to the School of Journalism and Communication of Peking University in 2017. It should come to no one's surprise, then, that the first lecture he gave to the group—and the first lecture held by the group at all—was on Lu Xun. Since then he has remained one of the most authoritative figures in the group, not only providing much-heeded counsel on its directions and choices, but also playing a key role in connecting it to Beijing's cultural establishment.

The group started holding weekly classes on Sunday, later switching to Saturday. Each class starts at 7 pm and lasts two hours. Group publications do not fail to point out how workers' willingness to spend two hours during a weekend studying, after a demanding working week, demonstrates their passion and lofty ideals.<sup>37</sup> The weekly class format itself is a legacy of the training centres for working-class writers established in the early years of the People's Republic.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Zhang Zhiyu [Zhang Huiyu], "Women de wenhua shuxie."

<sup>38</sup> Wang Hongzhe and Qiu Linchuan, 2015: 34.

Initially, alongside literary history tout court, classes included assignments given by Zhang Huiyu or other lecturers to participants. These assignments usually consisted in writing short pieces of prose that were then shared with the rest of the group and commented on by the instructor. Such works would be eventually carried in the group's collective publications, that have remained, as we will see, important testimonies to the gradual evolution from such early thematic assignments to more spontaneous, ambitious and engaging creations. Publications here refer to the self-produced collections of works by PLC members, that will be analysed in the next section; for now, suffice it to say that while the 2015 collection was 171-page long, the 2018 edition had grown to 467 pages. Importantly, although now lectures tend to be less focused on group members' own works (also given the exponential growth of participants), instructors have maintained a rigorous practice of not correcting them, but only offering technical comments and advice, based on the assumption that group members are better entitled to choose the best way to tell their own experience, both content- and style-wise.

Based on personal observation in the period September–December 2019, average participation now is around twenty to twenty-five individuals, with roughly a dozen regulars. Classes (called *jiangzuo* 讲座 or *ke* 课) are held in the meeting room of the Home, and participants are tasked with keeping it clean given that it is also used for other meetings. Each class is participated also by an irregular number of occasional listeners, generally university students, journalists, or other curious bystanders. The traditional format of 40–60-minute talk by a lecturer (*zhujiangren* 主讲人) followed by Q&A is generally respected, although it varies depending on the theme and instructor. For example, the class on 26 November was held by Xu Duo (who is also one of the Home founders who contributes more prolifically to the group), who alternated observations on musical writing with songs and comments from the audience. Similarly, the class on 14 December was chaired by Song Yi 宋轶, a documentary filmmaker with an interest in the themes of labour and a long association with the Home. He set the class up in a theatrical way in the small

cinema next to the Art and Culture Museum, asking individual members to step forward and sit in the centre when they were called to discuss and share their writings. Needless to say, it must have been very different in the past, when the group mostly met to share and discuss members' creative work. Sometimes films are screened and discussed with their makers.

Classes usually revolve around certain themes, individual or multiple authors, or technical issues about writing. Authors and themes are extracted from the whole of Chinese literature, from the ancient to the contemporary, and at times from foreign literatures as well. Questions that are central to the existence of worker authors, such as the possibility for writing to change a person's life, are repeatedly addressed. Sessions devoted to issues of technique involved questions of how to create focal points (*zhongdian* 重点), how to make the story coherent, about ways to talk about things familiar to the authors, or how to elaborate convincing reflections from particular events extracted from everyday life, and strategies to capture readers' attention. The stress on familiarity and lived experience, of course, is attributable to the particularities of workers' literature, but most of all to the authority that contemporary Chinese literary thought assigns to *zhen* following the tradition of May Fourth. The majority of guest lecturers to the group come from contexts that have nothing to do with workers' literature or its promotion, and therefore reflect the dominant ideas in the literary scene as a whole, more than a specific agenda about how workers' writing should be properly done. All these points always produce lively discussions among participants, many of whom tend to link the issues under scrutiny with their personal or writing experience, and advance their own proposals. The feelings that come from participation in the weekly lectures are captured by Wan Huashan 万华山, an active member of the group (who will reappear later in this chapter, and will be the protagonist of chapter Eight), who compared them with the classes he sneaked in at Peking University: "Nobody here has ever been to university and they all do different jobs, yet it is literature that has helped them to swallow the pill of real life. After roaming around for so many years, I finally found true joy and warmth" (这里的每个人都没有上过大学, 做着不同的工作,

但文学却是帮助他们熬过现实生活的良药。在外漂泊多年，我第一次感到真正的快乐和温暖).<sup>39</sup>

DATE	LECTURER	INSTITUTION OR ROLE	TITLE OF LECTURE
7 September	Nie Hui 聂辉	Senior reporter with <i>Vista kan tianxia</i>	Can you not be a reporter?: the role of journalists and vocational study
14 September	Jin Jin 靳锦	GQ chief editorial writer	How to write your story
21 September	Xi Yuan 西元	Novelist	How does the contemporary novel write of “hunger”
12 October	Qu Xinyi 渠馨一	Film producer	The motive force of pictures: how to write ordinary people’s life stories
19 October	Wen Chen 文珍	Novelist	Write, i.e. read
26 October	Xiao Tie 肖铁	Associate professor, Indiana University	Literature and reality, Carver and Carver
2 November	Feng Tongqing 冯同庆	Professor, China University of Labour Relations	<i>Nanfang, nanfang</i>
9 November	Federico Picerni	PhD student, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice / Heidelberg University	Epic writing: background, subjects and styles of Italian working-class literature
16 November	Ding Zhenzen 丁珍珍	Research fellow, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore	Youth writing and contemporary China
23 November	Yang Ying 杨瑛 Zhang Weifeng 张伟锋 Liu Shaoyi	<i>Pingyuan</i> journal China Writers Association China Writers Association	Reading of poetry, <i>sanwen</i> , novels

<sup>39</sup> Wan Huashan, “Wo gaozhong chouxue.”

	刘少一		
26 November	Xu Duo 许多	New Workers' Band	Songs from the earth: discussing song writing
30 November	Li Yaya 季亚娅	Editor, <i>Shiyue</i>	Sharing and commenting on students' (学员) works
7 December	Zhang Xin 张歆	PhD student, Minzu University of China	The hometown of literature
14 December	Song Yi 宋轶	Filmmaker	A discussion on new workers' autobiographies

Figure 3 - Lecturers and themes at the PLC during my fieldwork.

Among the instructors that visited the literature group in the period of my fieldwork, the list of which is displayed in Figure 3, some were particularly interesting, and for different reasons. One of them was Feng Tongqing 冯同庆, a sociologist with a vast experience in research into the conditions of labour in China, that also included some legal counselling for labourers. This interest stemmed from Feng's own experience as a sent-down youth both in rural areas and in a factory during the Cultural Revolution. Formerly employed at the Beijing-based China University of Labour Relations, his investigations also brought him to the Pearl River Delta, and allowed him to follow the evolution of workers' conditions from the 1980s up until recent times. Based on his life and inquiries, Feng has also written two novels, *Chilechuan nianhua* 敕勒川年华 (*Time Among the Tiele*), largely based on his experience as a sent-down youth, and *Nanfang nanfang* 南方 南方 (*South, South*), on migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta. When he came to the literature group on 2 November 2019, the latter book had just recently come out. His visit aroused the group's enthusiasm, showing his popularity among them, which he openly reciprocated. His lecture was largely based on how to tell stories about workers, and how to circumvent themes that would be too politically "sensitive" (*mingan* 敏感). He pointed out in particular that the transformations in labour relations had also produced a profound moral change in society, and workers' literature should spell

it out. Some group members did not conceal their admiration for Feng, praising his novels for their elegance and profundity, as opposed to the shabbiness they found in most works written by workers.

Another lecture of interest, but for a different reason, was that held by Li Yaya 李亚娅. An editor at the top-notch literary journal *Shiyue* 十月 (*October*), she focused her talk on discussing some group members' works that she had read beforehand, pointing out their strong and weak points. She particularly instructed them on how to improve the organisation of content, improving their ability to focus on one central point in one story and leaving other ideas to other stories, and to direct their attention not only to their personal experiences, but also to the happenings around them, gradually elaborating a larger outlook on the external world. Her session was likewise actively participated, also thanks to the fact that some group members were directly involved and engaged through their works. The feeling of respect for an individual coming from a prestigious journal to offer valuable free advice to the group was palpable, and is consistent with the general intention of the PLC to bolster its members' literary skills with qualified trainers. It is notable that most of the guest lecturers started their talks specifying that they were not there to teach, but to share some ideas with the audience, in an attempt to reduce their distance from their interlocutors—often with little success. Although undoubtedly this rhetoric was sincere in most of the cases, it also shows a symbolic and conventional debt to Mao's prescription, given in the "Yan'an Talks," for teachers to be also students of the "masses" they provide training to.

Starting from 2018, the PLC also launched its own literary award, called Labourers' Literature Prize (*Laodongzhe wenxue jiang* 劳动者文学奖). The idea came to the group from the existence of an award by the same name established by a group of workers trained by the Workers' Part-Time Literary Research Society (*Gongren yeyu wenxue yanjiushe* 工人业余文学研究社) under Tianjin's No. 1 Workers' Cultural Palace (*Diyi gongren wenhuagong* 第一工人文化宫), opened in 1956. Organised on a yearly basis, initially in December and then in January starting from 2021, the setup of the Picun prize follows that of other prestigious literary prizes. Competing

works are judged by a vetting committee made up by Zhang Huiyu, Wang Dezhi, and a number of other individuals, often chosen among those who have lectured the group during the year or in the past. It includes a best author prize (*zuijia zuozhe jiang* 最佳作者奖), a best work prize (*zuijia zuopin jiang* 最佳作品奖), and then prizes for the best story, the best nonfiction, the best poetry and the best *sanwen*, plus a generous amount of “excellent work” (*youxiu zuopin* 优秀作品) prizes. In addition to being another get-together occasion, the prize constitutes an encouragement to PLC members to keep on writing, valorising their creative work and promoting mutual emulation. Winners usually receive books and journals as presents instead of the conventional amount of money, as it would generally be the case in China.

### 3.2.2. *The meaning and composition of writing*

While originally group members published autobiographical accounts in prose, genres quickly diversified. Nonfictional prose, mostly autobiographical, of course, remains the preferred form of expression among them. Instructors, especially Zhang Huiyu, have strongly pushed in the direction of a conscious study and employment of the techniques of nonfiction, not only to take advantage of the popularity of the genre among specialist circles in China today (a point that will be expanded in chapters Four and Seven), but also to train authors’ skills, as writing nonfiction is seen by Zhang as a first step towards writing fiction.<sup>40</sup> Clearly then, instructors also exercise a certain influence in orienting the stylistic choices of the group. And it has paid back in terms of visibility and success: in September 2019, for instance, some members of the group won the “Recording the Hometown: Love Hometown Nonfiction Writing Competition” (*Guxiang jishi. Ai guxiang feixugou xiezuodasai* 故乡纪事·爱故乡非虚构写作大赛), held, among others, by the Beijing Love Hometown

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<sup>40</sup> Interview in Beijing on 9 December 2019.



Cultural Development Centre, an organisation under the auspices of the Centre for Rural Construction at Renmin University, and thus flew to Shenzhen to collect the award and give speeches. Indeed, the jump from the short story, fictional or nonfictional alike, to the full-length novel is not an easy one. That is true for writers in general, but especially for those who come from the working class. As suggested by Li Yunlei, producing a novel by a worker author on labour-related themes means offering a comprehensive view of subalternity in a historical and spatial context, which requires the time, energy and training many subaltern authors do not have.<sup>41</sup> However, one should also recollect Raymond Williams' observation that the novel, "with its quite different narrative forms" (different from orality, but also from nonfiction and poetry, for that matter), has historically tended to be "virtually impenetrable to working-class writers" of some generations.<sup>42</sup>

Poetry also rapidly earned pole position. That comes to no surprise, as it is a reflection of two factors, namely the persisting power of the genre as a "meme in Chinese cultural tradition" (meme here as the cultural counterpart of the gene),<sup>43</sup> actively held up by non-professionals and often engaged with public discourse and matters,<sup>44</sup> on the one hand, and its exquisitely working-class tradition, on the other. Historically, in China just like elsewhere, but to different degrees, workers' literature has found its larger expression in poetry. This is evident from worker-peasant-soldier poetry of the Mao era and even more from migrant workers' poetry. Far from being an "easier" form of expression, it is undoubtedly more rapid to write and to read, which is helpful for individuals who exhaust their time and energy on workplaces. In addition, it has a unique performative power and social nature. It can be read out at public gatherings, and these

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<sup>41</sup> Li Yunlei, "Xin gongren wenxue," 25.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, "The Writer," 25.

<sup>43</sup> Van Crevel, *Walk on the Wild Side*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Inwood, "Between License and Responsibility" and *Verse Going Viral*.

performances have an important history as they bore a clear political nature during the revolution and the early decades of the PRC, as they were oriented at inflating listeners' political consciousness and commitment (of course, migrant worker poets have also made some appearances at high-level poetic readings).

Poetry reading gatherings in Picun they mostly serve to reinforce the sense of community, in the triple sense of the actual living community of the village, the creative community of the Migrant Workers' Home, and the class-based community of migrant workers in general. A perfect example comes from the long poem "Women cong chejian zoulai" 我们从车间走来 (We Come from the Workshop), written by Xiao Hai 小海—the group's most prolific poet—and presented at the 2019 edition of the Labourers' Poems and Songs festival, on 1 September. In the typically exuberant style of its author (more on him in chapter Five), the poem describes the epic scene of workers coming out of their workplaces and heading towards the reader (or listener), with an abundance of descriptions that mix technical vocabulary ("hands dripping with oil emanate an odour of rust", 油汪的双手散发着铁锈味儿) and typically poetic expressions ("we float like wind / we drift like clouds", 我们似流浪的风/我们如漂泊的云), and concludes:

我们来到首都北京

我们来到北京皮村

在东五环外的一片苍茫中

不分彼此一起学习

是工友之家的温暖

让我们聚在了一起

让陌生人成为朋友

让流浪者有家可回

让爱好文学的人吹响梦的集结号

即使在石头缝里也要绽放光辉

[...]

我们身披腐烂的月色从车间走来

我们卸下工作的疲惫从车间走来

我们抖擞机械的身躯从车间走来

我们忘掉青春的流逝从车间走来

我们趟着光阴的大河从车间走来

我们重拾太阳的光辉从车间走来

我们从车间走来

我们从车间走来

we have come to the capital Beijing

we have come to Beijing's Picun

in a piece of barren land beyond the eastern fifth ring

we share our lives and study together

it is the warmth of Migrant Workers Home

that has assembled us together

that has turned strangers into friends

that has given floaters a home to return to

that has allowed lovers of literature to sound the collective trumpet of dreams

radiance can blossom even from the cracks of stones

[...]

we come from the workshop, wearing the decaying moonlight  
we come from the workshop, unloading the fatigue of work  
we come from the workshop, our bodies mechanised  
we come from the workshop, forgetting the passing of youth  
we come from the workshop, braising in a vast river of time  
we come from the workshop, picking up the glory of the sun  
we come from the workshop  
we come from the workshop<sup>45</sup>

The text itself is highly performative in its active attempt to get reader (or listener) to identify with it. The repeated use of *We* in the last stanza is indicative of a plural subject, identifiable not only with the author and performers, but also with the audience (if it is made up by workers, of course). It parallels, also graphically, with examples from the earlier Chinese poetry history, most notably Guo Moruo's "Tiangou" 天狗 (Celestial Dog), where every line starts with *I* (*wo* 我), and the parallel vividly shows the shift from individuality to the collective. In so doing, and in its exaltation of the Migrant Workers Home, it borrows profusely from Mao-era political lyricism. The performance was reinforced by the fact that the poem was collectively read by Xiao Hai and three other group members, Fan Yusu, Wan Huashan and Yi Jing 易经, who alternated reading one stanza each, and then chorally read out the final one. Such reading was not a one-time event, and it is actually a consolidated practice among the group. Although these gatherings are generally held in Picun, they have also reached other environments at times. In November 2017, for example, Xiao Hai led a flash mob against migrants' evictions that consisted in the public reading of "Zou ba haizi

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<sup>45</sup> Xiao Hai, "Women cong chejian zoulai."

chenzhe Beijing de beifeng” 走吧孩子趁着北京的北风 (Go, Child, With Beijing’s Northern Wind), a poem written by Yu Xiuhua 余秀华 in solidarity with the evicted.<sup>46</sup>

For the PLC, then, writing is performative in its ability to turn into a social practice of community making. Its activities are fully integrated within the Migrant Workers Home’s scheme of community-level, community-organised and community-oriented practice. In other words, it takes place primarily in Picun, it is organised, animated and participated by the individuals who live there, and it is specifically aimed at improving the cultural life of the village and its people. The community rescues migrant workers from atomisation in the city, and it is in the collective reality of the community that they can make their own individuality more meaningful. Emulation is also part of the game, of course, which Fan Yusu herself did not hesitate to admit plainly: “Instructors would say: ‘Hand in a paper!’ You’d just feel a bit embarrassed [to be the one] not to hand it in, right?” (老师说：同学们，交篇作文吧，你觉得你不交有点不好意思，是吧).<sup>47</sup> In a way, workers’ literature itself benefits from a cooperative dimension turned into its *modus operandi* instead of just the sum of individual working-class authors.

### 3.2.3. *The group and its authors*

What the literature group means to its practitioners is well expressed by the words they use to describe it: “my second classroom” (第二课堂), “my second hometown” (第二故乡),<sup>48</sup> “my Beijing home” (我来北京的家),<sup>49</sup> “my other family” (我另一家),<sup>50</sup> “family-like warmth” (有家一

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<sup>46</sup> A clip of the event can be found on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qqx3fGsXcYU> (accessed 12 January 2022).

<sup>47</sup> Interview in Beijing on 2 November 2019.

<sup>48</sup> You Lizi, “Wo de guxiang.”

<sup>49</sup> Zhao Jinlai, “Wo yu Picun,” 75.

样的温暖).<sup>51</sup> These family- or home-associated terms are particularly relevant in this breed of poetry that usually stresses, by contrast, the condition of solitude and homelessness of migrants. For some, joining the group meant finding an ensemble of like-minded individuals to share an already well-developed writing passion with. It was so for Wan Huashan, who joined in late 2016 and instantaneously felt his passion for writing rekindled after several disappointments. What he has earned from the group has not so much to do with an improvement of the quality of his writing, which he attributes more to his regular reading habits, but to the encouragement received from instructors and the possibility to engage in a fruitful intellectual exchange with other practitioners. For him, this is paramount (最关键的): otherwise, “even if you wanted to write, you end up giving it up” (你自己想写, 最后的结果是没有写), he said, adding that the absence of people reading and giving pertinent comments to a writer’s production was discouraging.<sup>52</sup>

A similar sensation was felt by Xiao Hai, who was actually driven to Picun in 2016 by his passion for music rather than for writing poetry, but ended up enjoying the opportunity to have a “qualified” audience for his poems, not to mention that participation in the group helped him diversify his styles and find the courage to write about “low” themes such as factory life and labour (more in chapter Five).<sup>53</sup> Motivation plays a key role in making people stay in the group, and it can mean different things according to different individuals. Jin Hongyang 金红阳, the owner of a small electronics shop at Zhongguancun, was already an active amateur writer and a member of the Anhui Writers Association. As soon as he got to Beijing, after the private school where he worked in Anhui was shut down, he started attending courses at the Lao She Institute of Literature and sitting in classes at Peking University, but he somewhat felt he felt out of place there (我有什么资格). He

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<sup>50</sup> Xiao Yu, “Wo yu Picun,” 71.

<sup>51</sup> Wang Chunyu, “Shengdi·jia,” 122.

<sup>52</sup> Interview in Beijing on 9 November 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Interview in Beijing on 26 October 2019.

was brought to Picun by Fan Yusu's fame in 2017, and he still reminds the surprise he felt to find out that the place "actually existed" (真的有这样的空间). He felt he had finally found a place to study and write, and has remained there ever since.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, there has been an impressive variety of ways through which individuals who would later become part of the group's backbone have come to Picun at some point in their lives. Guo Fulai, for example, was driven to the village by books themselves, so to speak. Formerly a farmer, he left his native Hebei relatively late, in his 40s, and moved to Beijing to take up a job as a welder. He had already written some pieces in literary outlets of his home province, and in Beijing he felt frustrated because he could not afford to buy as many books as he desired. When he learned of a free library for migrant workers in Picun, that must have sounded like windfall to him. He found out about the literature group when he visited to borrow books and joined soon thereafter. Wang Chunyu, one of the earliest members of the group, was working as a deliveryman (*kuaidiyuan* 快递员) when he brought a parcel to the New Workers' Art Troupe, for a journal they were running at the time, *Shequ kuaibao* 社区快报 (*Community Bulletin*), and was impressed by the ambience he found, and also by the fact that the journal's editor personally collected the parcel and stopped for a talk with him, something he positively compared with his experience with other journals that would not even let him inside their premises.<sup>55</sup>

For him, like for many others, joining the group meant starting to write in the first place. Xu Keduo 徐克铎 is often held up as an example of the potentialities of worker writers provided with proper access to cultural production, both by the PLC and external commentators alike. Hailing from Hubei, where he was born in 1954, he farmed the land and served as a soldier, before moving to Beijing to help his son and daughter, migrant workers themselves, look after their children. He

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<sup>54</sup> Interview in Beijing, 30 November 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Wu Jingya, "Picun wenxue xiaozu."

was introduced to the group by Fan Yusu in 2017, and it was a revelation for him, who started writing intensively and prolifically. He mostly writes about his memories of the countryside, something that most migrants can identify with (albeit to different degrees). He is intense in the recollection of emotions and precise in his description, and he does so using a colloquial language full of dialectical inflexions, described by Li Yaya, one of the guest instructors mentioned before, as a style that actively attempts to establish a conversation with the reader. Participating in the group was crucial to convince also Yuan Wei, a founding member, to start writing. His main motivation was to overcome solitude, fill the gaps in his formal education and improve his writing skills, something that could pay off also job-wise. Although he cites an impressive list of sources of inspiration (Zheng Xiaoqiong, Xu Lizhi, Yu Hua 余华, Ah Cheng 阿城, and even Nikolai Ostrovski, author of *How the Steel Was Tempered*, whom he remembers from his middle-school studies), Yuan Wei admits he is not fond of writing, which he reduced to an activity to “record some things” (记录一些东西).<sup>56</sup> In fact, his production is not vast, but it has been often praised by Zhang Huiyu. Despite the fact that he prefers to read and listen, he has decided to stay in Beijing even after the factory where he worked was moved in 2015, because he did not want to part ways with the group.

Some also leave the group. Participation is terribly irregular, a reflection of the precarious and unstable living conditions of migrants themselves. Although some members have stayed since the beginning, others, including very active and visible ones, have eventually left. Ji Tong 寂桐, pen-name of Zhang Ziyi 张子怡, was among the earliest members of the group, and wrote poems full of emotional intensity where she mostly dealt with such themes as homesickness, time, love and interpersonal relationships, and her own physical disability. Despite having no prior writing experience herself, she displayed an impressive skill at the creation of metaphors and the

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<sup>56</sup> Interview in Beijing, 14 December 2019.



construction of an efficacious imagery for the feelings she wished to convey. She left the group on Lunar New Year in 2017 for family reasons, going back to her hometown, although she sporadically returned to Beijing to participate in Home initiatives. A similar situation was lived by Li Ruo 李若, a factory worker who joined the group in 2015, and immediately distinguished herself for the quality and quantity of her poetry and nonfictional prose describing the stories from her native countryside, or also occasionally life in Picun (which will be the object of chapter Seven). She also left Beijing in the autumn of 2017, after getting married. Both she and Ji Tong, alongside many other individuals who have crossed the literature group or have stayed for some time, remain in touch through a bulging WeChat group of 302 members (January 2022). Yet, both have drastically reduced their writing production after they left, to the point of interrupting it altogether. This fact is one more proof of the fundamental role exercised by a collective dimension in giving workers the material possibility and mental disposition to transgress the invisible class boundary of the literary practice.<sup>57</sup> None of the group members I interviewed (and, as far as I am aware, that others have interviewed as well) expressed any belief in writing as a *chulu* 出路, a way out of material subalternity (in the fashion of, for example, Wang Shiyue, Zheng Xiaoqiong, and others). Cultural practice was mostly framed as having a *zuoyong* 作用, practical use, in setting a good example and cultivating migrants' healthy interests.

Data on group members' presence in the annual anthologies published privately by the group to collect everything that every and each of the participants wrote during the year gives more information on the regularity of participation (see section 3.4). As Figure 4 shows, every year has a certain number of new contributors, but also a considerable, if not significantly higher, number of dropouts. It should come to no surprise that the dropout rate has spiked since 2017–2018, i.e. the period of relative stabilisation of a central core of regular authors associated with the PLC. Data show that participation has somewhat stabilised also in relative terms, since this “hard core” is

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<sup>57</sup> Sun Wanning, “Poetry of Labour,” 994.

accompanied by newcomers who mostly publish just a few pieces, or leave after just one year. Of course, not publishing does not necessarily imply a total dropout, given that the author might just continue to attend group lectures without writing or submitting anything of their own. Guo Fulai, Fan Yusu and Yuan Wei have been the only three individuals who have seen their work published in every anthology; but others, such as Xiao Fu and Wang Chunyu, have also been members of the group since the beginning, even if they have not appeared in every collection. What is relevant is that this high dropout rate comes with an increase in annual anthologies' size, meaning that there is a growth in the amount or length of pieces published by individual authors, signalling that the development of the PLC is both extensive and intensive, quantitative and qualitative.

	2015 anthology	2016 anthology	2017 anthology	2018 anthology	2019 anthology
Number of authors	18	32	30	26	24
New authors	18	23	17	11	12
Percentage	100%	72%	57%	42%	50%
Dropouts	0	8	19	17	15
Percentage	0%	25%	63%	65%	62%

Figure 4 - Authors published in group annual anthologies.

#### 3.2.4. The role of mediators

Authors are not the only actors that make the practice of the PLC possible. Mediators also play an important role. By *mediators* (a term of Bourdieusian origin) I mean individuals who are not part of the group itself and come from other contexts belonging to Beijing's cultural establishment, such as literary journals, cultural bodies, universities, and so on. They normally come into direct contact with the group by lecturing, then they remain in touch, come back to hold other lectures, take part in activities such as the Labourers' Literature Prize as members of the jury

panel, but above all establish a contact with the city's cultural scene. Not only do they then exercise a certain influence on the group's aesthetic and practical directions, but it is mostly through them that PLC members get better chances to publish in prestigious literary outlets or to access state-sanctioned institutions for literary training. Mediators are key actors in the literary mode of production of the PLC. Chapter Two has shown how mediators operate also in migrant workers' literature at large, where the most striking examples can be Yang Honghai himself, with his promotion of migrant authors as Shenzhen's cultural trademark, but also influential patrons like Yang Lian, behind Guo Jinniu's international fame, and Qin Xiaoyu with the selection of poets that eventually ended up in the *Wo de shipian* anthology. In the case of the PLC, mediators—lecturers and instructors in particular—are conceptualised as inheritors of the revolutionary tradition of Communist-affiliated intellectuals committed to training worker writers.<sup>58</sup> They are also the embodiments of the nonconfrontational policy of the group, both towards society and the cultural system. There is no apparent plan to defy the powers that be, also cultural ones. While of course the PLC has an agenda to disrupt the normal state of things of China's cultural life by bringing the voices and creations of worker authors in, it seems oriented to do so through a policy of alliances with members of the apparatus itself that prove to be sympathetic with the group.

Like already mentioned, volunteer lectures are the main channel through which mediators become involved with the PLC. The need for new lecturers came especially after Zhang Huiyu, who had been the group's principal instructor since its inception, left for a scholarly visit of one year to the University of California, San Diego in 2015. One of the first to step in was Liu Chen 刘忱, a professor at the Central Party School, whose research also covers cultural access in rural areas and among rural migrants in the city. She took an interest in the Migrant Workers Home as early as 2011, when she divulged its activities with an article in *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 (*People's Daily*), the official CPC mouthpiece, titled “Dagong wenhua, zhuzhao laodongzhe jingshen jiayuan” 打工

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<sup>58</sup> Zhang Zhiyu [Zhang Huiyu], “Women wenxue zhi lu,” 325.

文化，烛照劳动者精神家园 (Migrant Workers' Culture Illuminates Labourers' Spiritual Home). As would be expected, she highlights the communion of interests between the state and activists for the cultural and social rights of migrant workers. When Sun Heng, performing the Art Troupe song “Guoke” 过客 (Guest) during the 2019 Labourers' Poems and Songs festival, said that migrant workers do not feel at home in the city, Liu Chen, who was in the audience, stood up and reminded them that the working class is at the helm of the country and that they should not feel like guests anywhere they go. However, it would be inaccurate and prejudicial to assume that Liu Chen is the voice of the party-state (which is also an entity with many diverging factions) within the group. Just like everyone else in the group, she negotiates between different positions. She also holds that PLC authors should not seek after the mainstream, particularly pointing out the objective conditions that often prevent them from joining it; on the contrary, they should see arts as a way to improve their existence as three-dimensional human beings.<sup>59</sup>

One more scholar that joined the group over that period include Bu Wei 卜卫, from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, another top-notch institution, who also carried out field research in Picun and has tried to attract interest on matters of cultural accessibility of marginal areas ever since. Unsurprisingly, Fan Yusu's rise to fame attracted yet more intellectuals, such as the nonfiction writer Yuan Ling 袁凌 and Li Yunlei, whom we have encountered in chapter Two as a leading expert of subaltern literature, who has also published his own collection of short stories, *Anye xinglu* 暗夜行路 (*Strolling in the Night*), among the group's publications.

Above all, another individual who came into contact with the PLC around 2016 was Shi Libin 师力斌. He is a living expression of the group's policy of alliances and the possibilities that mediators open up for worker authors. Shi Libin is a poet and the vice-editor of *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 (*Beijing Literature*), the capital's leading literary journal as far as the official scene is

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<sup>59</sup> Interview in Beijing on 3 December 2019.

concerned. A man with rural origins himself, he had the opportunity to get his hands on a printed collection of the PLC members' contributions (more on group publications in the next section), and his interest in the group stemmed from there.<sup>60</sup> Other than lecturing the group, attending its activities and actively contributing to awarding the Labourers' Literature Prize, Shi Libin has also sponsored group members' publication on *Beijing wenxue* and recommended Fan Yusu, Xiao Hai and Wan Huashan to the Lao She Institute of Literature, run by the Beijing branch of the Federation of Literary and Art Circles. For Shi, giving visibility to what he calls "common writers" (普通写作者) means carrying on the (typically "Beijing-flavour") tradition spearheaded by Lao She to engage with the lower strata of society. On top of that, this attitude reveals a continuation of an intellectual interest in what has historically been defined as "mass culture" (*dazhong wenhua* 大众文化), which refers less to pop culture than to creations by the masses understood as a social category. Shi admits that sometimes their writing skill is not as developed as one may want, but they exhibit a historical and social "acuteness" (敏锐性) that writers from the intellectual "minority" (少数人) can hardly hope for.<sup>61</sup>

A major publishing project in which Shi Libin has involved members of the PLC has been the *Beipiao shipian* 北漂诗篇 (*Northern Drifters' Poetry*) series. A union of the words *Beijing* and *piaopai*, *beipiao* specifically refers to *hukou*-less migrants in Beijing. The series, that Shi has been editing together with the renowned avant-garde poet An Qi 安琪 (who lectured the PLC in autumn 2021), has the aim of collecting the poetic productions of such individuals. In the preface to the first volume, published in April 2017 (almost concomitant with Fan Yusu's memoir), Shi presents migrants as those who "have tributed their talent and blood to themselves as well as Beijing" (为自己也为北京奉献才华和心血), as well as a living sing of the progress of China's society, where

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Zhang Huiyu in Beijing, 9 December 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Personal communication, 12 November 2019.

even the lower classes aspire to culture,<sup>62</sup> while at the same time acknowledging that they clearly exhibit a “lack of any sense of identification with Beijing on an emotional level” (对北京在精神上缺乏认同感), because “[t]he chants written by several [of these] poets in the boundless sea of people of the capital are mute and solitary” (许多诗人写到京城茫茫人海中的呼喊, 却无声暗哑, 独立无援), and therefore they are in need of recognition on the part of the *intelligentsia*.<sup>63</sup> The PLC is particularly praised by Shi because “they have provided [us] anew with values of collectiveness, mutual help, friendship, equality, spirit of initiative, and optimism” (重新提供了有关集体、互助、友爱、平等、进取、乐观等新的价值观).<sup>64</sup> As a consequence, the first volume carried eleven PLC poets—Xiao Hai, Guo Fulai, Li Ruo, Xue Ting 雪婷, Ji Tong, Yuan Zhangwu 苑长武, Yuan Wei, Xu Liangyuan, Wang Chunyu, Xu Duo, Sun Heng—out of 124 authors. PLC members have maintained a consistent, albeit numerically reduced, presence in later volumes, as well.

The *Beipiao shipian* series is not the only space of this kind where the PLC has appeared. In 2018 the Danxiang kongjian 单向空间 bookstore (whose official English translation is Owspace) awarded the group a collective prize for the “New Voice of the Year” (*niandu xinsheng* 年度新声), and published essays and poems by Ma Dayong, Guo Fulai, Xiao Hai, Li Ruo, Fan Yusu, Wan Huashan, Xu Liangyuan and Chen Diqiao 陈迪桥 in its book series, specifically in an issue that was significantly titled *Xin Beijingren* 新北京人 (*New Beijingers*). Outside of China, the spring 2021 issue of *World Literature Today* contained a section on “Chinese Migrant Workers’ Literature,” with prose and poetry by Fu Qiuyun, Xiao Hai and Fan Yusu, with Zheng Xiaoqiong being the only worker author not from the PLC published in the issue that intends to give a general outline of migrant workers’ literature from China. Both these publications somewhat assign the PLC a

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<sup>62</sup> Shi Libin, “Daixu,” 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, 6–7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, 8.

representative status: the former for the new urban subjects that have changed Beijing's demographic texture, and the latter for migrant workers' literature as a whole. And to further prove the ever-growing ramifications of the PLC's external contacts, the 2022 edition of the Labourers' Literature Prize awarding ceremony was held at the Lu Xun Museum library in Beijing, the first time it has moved out of Picun. This marketisation of subalternity in exchange for symbolic capital has undoubtedly its pros, first of all the boost in visibility it makes possible for worker authors, although this symbolic capital is rarely translated into an economic one, such as career prospects or full-time cultural jobs.

A final word should be spent on foreign or foreign-based personalities who also act as a mediators, primarily as translators, but not exclusively. In 2019 alone, the group was visited, and sometimes lectured, by Paola Iovene (University of Chicago), Maghiel van Crevel (Leiden University), Tie Xiao 铁肖 (Indiana University), and myself. Writing about the unofficial poetry scene at large, van Crevel has observed that "a foreign researcher and translator also presents a channel for outward mobility, meaning foreign recognition—and hence, increased domestic recognition."<sup>65</sup> In fact, foreign scholars' interest has resulted in a surge of scholarship being produced in English-language academic journals on the PLC in very recent years, as well as cases of translations in non-Chinese languages. Apart from those, an example on the role of such foreign-based mediators has been the proposal advanced by Tie Xiao and myself at the group's December 2019 forum that it include translations of foreign workers' literatures in their publications (both the forum and publications are the object of the next section). The proposal was accepted and the first foreign translation published on the group's outlet was a selection of contemporary Italian worker poets, edited and translated by myself in association with Wan Huashan in May 2020.

### 3.2.5. *New workers' literature*

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<sup>65</sup> Van Crevel, *Walk on the Wild Side*, 8.

The ensemble of factors discussed above constitutes the mode of production (and circulation) of the group's own trademark, i.e. new workers' literature (*xin gongren wenxue* 新工人文学). The idea is clearly indebted to the general shift of the Home to the concept of new workers delineated by Lü Tu. Its literary characterisation advanced by Zhang Huiyu, however, presents some differences from its sociological one. This fact is also interesting for what concerns the interrelations between authors and mediators. Zhang Huiyu can be considered halfway between a mediator and an internal figure in the group. In fact, he is undoubtedly a leading personality of the PLC and cannot be considered external to it, but at the same time he is not an author either (nor an activist of the Home), and also plays a role very akin to that of mediators. Nevertheless, what is significant is that the theoretical conceptualisation of new workers' literature has not been pursued by an actual member of the group, but by one of its instructors—without doubt, the most important and respected one.

In his essay, “Ling yi zhong wenhua shuxie” 另一种文化书写 (Another Kind of Literary Endeavour), Zhang Huiyu endows new workers' literature with the role of “making invisible lives visible, and unreachable experiences readable” (让不可见的生活变得可见, 让不可触及的经验变得可读), that is to say to represent and convey its authors' experience of displacement and labour. New workers' literature is explicitly different from migrant workers'/*dagong* literature in its narrower sense as primarily southern-based and increasingly absorbed by state culture. Not far from Lü Tu, Zhang also considers that “*Worker* is not only a professional identity. In the political practice of the 20th century, workers were the political subject of the socialist state” (工人不只是职业身份, 在 20 世纪的政治实践中, 工人是社会主义国家的政治主体). Adopting the term thus means imbuing labour with positive values and historical relevance, instead of exclusively associating it with oppression and degradation. The *new* has political and social connotations.



Politically, it refers to the change—also on the subjective level—from “screws of the Lei Feng type in the system of ownership by the whole people” (全民所有制企业里的雷锋式的螺丝钉) to “screws ‘fallen to the ground’ in private enterprises or foreign firms” (民营、外资企业里的“一颗掉在地上”的螺丝钉), borrowing an image created by Xu Lizhi. Socially, it acknowledges the change in the inner composition of the working class, no longer restricted to the industrial sector but also comprising “subaltern labourers in the tertiary and services” (从事第三产业、服务业的底层劳动者), such as delivery workers and domestics. For what concerns literature strictly speaking, the *new* also means a new kind of workers’ literature where authors should be new workers themselves, or at least individuals who have had an experience as new workers. Content-wise, it should primarily be a reflection on and critique of the present (对现代、工业等文明有所反思和批判), springing up from their class-based spontaneous consciousness (Zhang uses the word *zijue* 自觉, literally “self-awareness,” not exactly synonymous with a politically loaded “consciousness”, *yishi* 意识).

Going back to the defining criteria of what can be considered workers’ literature (chapter One), in the triad of *by* whom (authorship), *for* whom (readership) and *about* what (subject-matter), Zhang seems convinced that new workers’ literature should be fundamentally *by* new workers themselves, and that is the crucial trait, although the definition is elastic enough in order to include new working-class jobs that have appeared in Chinese cities, which not surprisingly are reflected in the composition of the PLC itself. To give just one example, the majority of the women members of the group work as nannies, rather than in factories. That is also fundamental if new workers’ literature is to base itself on a “spontaneous consciousness” of the problems of labour, which does not automatically mean class consciousness, nor an explicit attempt to foster it, but implies that workers have a unique point of view produced by their lived experience that they can base themselves on to interpret the world through writing. “In this sense,” Zhang concludes, “new

workers' literature is not only the literary mode of a certain group, but a highly representative form of expression able to respond to the modern crisis" (新工人文学不只是特定群体的文学形态，而是一种更具代表性的、回应现代危机的文学表达).<sup>66</sup> The PLC openly espoused the concept in January 2021, renaming itself the New Workers' Literature Group (*xin gongren wenxue xiaozu* 新工人文学小组).

### 3.3. Focal point: from Picun literature to new workers' literature

One of the constant characteristics of Migrant Workers Home has been its attempt to publicise its activities through printed outlets, recently supplemented by online resources. The PLC has done the same, and since the very beginning it has collected and published its members' works. Gradually, such publications have expanded their scope and ambition, trying to reach out to a larger audience of worker authors also beyond Picun, while simultaneously maintaining a privileged inner gaze. Tracing the trajectory of these publications up to the present day is useful to understand how this has happened, and why printed publications remain so important.

Like already said, the Home started its printing activities long before the PLC was born. One of the first outlets it produced, when it was still called Farmers Home, was *Shequ kuaibao*, mentioned before in connection with group member Wang Chunyu. *Shequ kuaibao* was a four-page tabloid, jointly edited by the Xiaojiahe Community Association for the Education and Culture of Migrant Workers (*Xiaojiahe shequ dagongzhe wenhua jiaoyu wenhua xiehui* 肖家河社区打工者文化教育协会) and the Farmers Home, which was then based at Xiaojiahe. Wang Dezhi and Sun Heng were on the editorial board, together with Jiang Guoliang 姜国良, still a prominent member of the Home today, and others such as Xiao Shan 小山, Zhang Yan'e 张艳娥 and Chen Jun 陈军.

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<sup>66</sup> Zhang Zhiyu [Zhang Huiyu], "Ling yi zhong wenhua shuxie," 314–315.

Opened in early 2004, it came out irregularly, although it maintained a monthly presence. It carried national news as well as information on volunteers' activities, programmes of events, job postings, and occasional poetry. Its main purpose was to publicise the Home and to serve as mutual help, especially by sharing info on available jobs, and it was carried out by its successor, *Gongyou tongxun* 工友通讯 (*Workmates Correspondence*), that came out in 2006 under the editorship of the "Tongxin Night School" (*Tongxin yexiao* 同心夜校). Ordinary news were replaced by reports on the school's activity, or articles on workers' condition and short memoirs by school participants. The first issue on 1 November 2006 carried a vehement declaration which also said: "We don't need anyone to tell us what is good moral quality. We don't need anyone to tell us where is our way out. We're not idiots, we are perfectly able to think, and why on earth should we let others' ideas stifle our imagination?" (我们不需要让别人来告诉我们什么是高素质，我们不需要然别人来告诉我们出路在哪。我们不是白痴，我们有自己的思考能力，为什么要让别人的思想遏制我们自己的想象力呢).

Fully consistent with the aims of the Art Troupe, the declaration powerfully affirmed the value and potentiality of workers' self-expression. This purpose was continued—concomitantly with a reduction of news unrelated to literature—by *Tongxin gongyou* 同心工友 (*Tongxin Workmates*), that replaced *Gongyou tongxun* in summer 2007. Looking more like a notebook than a journal, it gave even greater emphasis to workers' writings, introduced by short fragments on such themes as "Wenxin zhuyu" 温馨祝语 (Words of Warmth) and "Yexiao ganshou" 夜校感受 (Impressions of the School), followed by longer memoirs or essays for the sections called "Dagong shenghuo" 打工生活 (Migrant Workers' Life) and "Dagong xinqing" 打工心情 (Migrant Workers' Feelings), and supplemented by important guidelines of legal assistance on workers' rights, as well as by information on the Art Troupe's activities. A further step in this direction was *Xin gongren de*

*wenhua yu shijian* 新工人的文化与实践 (*New Workers' Culture and Practice*), compiled in 2014 with stories by and on migrant workers.

Alongside these later publications, in January 2008 the Home started another eight-page tabloid, *Xin gongren* 新工人 (*New Workers*). Presented as the outlet of the Tongxin Literary Society, the first issue opens with an inaugural statement (*fakanci* 发刊词) with similar tones as that in *Gongyou tongxun*, and it also contains an historical tidbit, that is the announcement of the future opening of the Arts and Culture Museum, with an open call to contribute with material objects of relevance. On top of that, the first issue published a manifesto of the literary society, where the nature of workers' self-expression and creative democracy it purported to promote were laid out with considerable precision:

我们要在这个群体上建立起属于自己的、实实在在的文化价值观。这个观念就是：在现实生活的基础上，提倡艺术作品的口语化、大众化，让我们这个群体的普通成员都能理解它、接受它、喜欢它、创新它；那么，既然这种文化是我们的现实生活基础上产生的，它就必然的[sic]要服务于这一群体！

We want to build a real and authentic cultural outlook that belong to us, starting from ourselves as a group. Their perspective is: on the basis of real life, advocating the popularisation and the adoption of a colloquial language for literary and art works, in order to let every ordinary member of our group understand them, receive them, appreciate them, and create new ones; therefore, given that this culture is produced on the basis of our material life, it must necessarily serve this group!

This shows that printed publications had a double function. Not only did they pass on information on Home activities and gave publicity to these early experiments of workers' writing in Picun, but they also elaborated on the theory behind it all. And such theory draws heavily from the

categories and debates developed especially during the first half of the 20th century, regardless whether the association is conscious or not, showing that present-day society is still a fertile soil for questions of democratised and popular expressions of culture. In fact, the second issue of *Xin gongren*, out in May 2008, contains other theoretical short pieces on “Women yao shenme yang de wenhua” 我们要什么样的文化? (What Kind of Culture Do We Want?) and “Xin wenhua cong nali kaishi” 新文化从哪里开始? (From Where Does *New Culture* Begin), as well as a talk given by Sun Heng on post-Reform labour mobility in China at a forum held after the inauguration of the museum. It also carried some poetry, also by authors outside Picun, like Wu Ji (revealing an early relationship between the Art Troupe and the Workers’ Poetry Alliance), Yi Ming 佚名 and Zeng Jiqiang 曾继强, both of whom would then appear in Qin Xiaoyu’s *Wo de shipian* anthology.

In 2009 *Xin gongren* became a quarterly and drastically changed its graphics and format. Its first two issues in June 2009 and January 2010 had carried news on and poetry from the Labourers’ Poems and Songs festivals held in those months. Later it continued to publish poetry and pieces of reportage on labour, but it also expanded its scope to broader questions, including reports on workers’ strikes abroad. The third issue in July 2010 was entirely dedicated to the commemoration of suicidal Foxconn workers, while the fifth issue in June 2011 carried articles on the *hukou* system and its proposed reform, as well as a discussion on the so-called “Chongqing experiment” (*Chongqing shijian* 重庆实践) carried out under the leadership of Bo Xilai 薄熙来 with ruthless crackdowns on corruption, parades of sympathy towards workers, and the revisiting of symbolism from the Mao era, reported by *Xin gongren* in an essentially positive way.

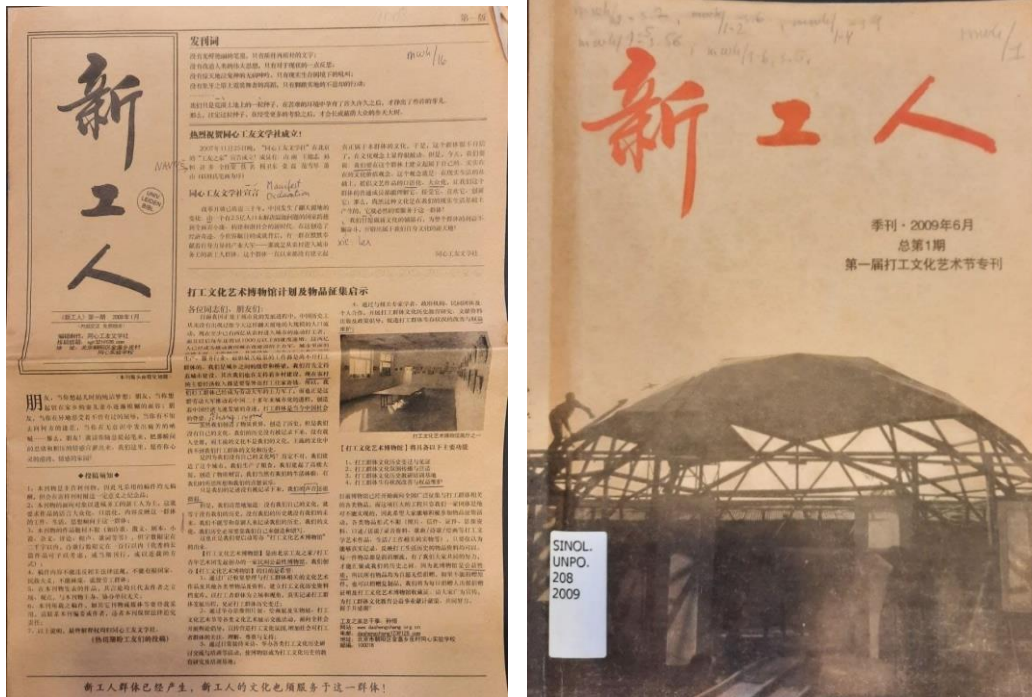


Figure 5 - The first issues of Xin Gongren as a tabloid (left) and journal (right), with Leiden University seal or tag.

All the aforementioned publications were strictly “for internal distribution” (*neibu jiaoliu* 内部交流), a caption used to avoid political attention, or, more often, financial and bureaucratic problems linked to publishing rules. A publication “for internal distribution” comes without a book number, the commercial identifier assigned to a publication to make it unique, in possession of a copyright, and legally marketable. In theory, then, is not meant to be circulated beyond the group or circle that produces it, although that is almost never the case. However, in 2008 the Home also started an officially public paper with the Picun village committee, called *Picun* 皮村, a monthly tabloid inaugurated by Xu Duo’s interview to Zhang Song 张松, the secretary of the Picun party branch. The paper published general news, but it also gave ample room to the activities of the Art Troupe, workers’ stories (and occasional poetry), as well as useful information, such as about the provisions of the newly-approved Labour Contract Law. It was essentially another form of the policy of alliances made possible by the Art Troupe’s nonconflictual approach.

Against this rich backdrop of publishing efforts, it seems almost natural that the PLC would feel the need to equip itself with a publication to collect the works written by its adherents. Much

like the Labourers' Literature Prize, this publication would have a double function as a spiritual encouragement for group members and a form of publicity of the group's existence and production. Despite having been born deep into the Digital Age, the group privileged a publication in print with respect to an online outlet (which it has opened, although it is less active), a testimony to the continued power of the printed word, owing undoubtedly to the cultural capital associated with it. The first of such publications was called *Picun wenxue* 皮村文学 (*Picun Literature*). Produced in 2015, to mark the first year of the PLC, it came out in a very raw and strongly amateurish form, as a series of white A4 pages with no recognisable formatting, and rigorously "for internal distribution.. The collection has been published yearly, usually towards the end of the year, gathering all the works that PLC members have produced during that period (following an internal call that members are free to ignore as well), both original or published elsewhere, mostly arranged and edited by Fu Qiuyun and Zhang Huiyu. Its gradual expansion over the years mirrors the group's growth. As it was shown in the previous section, and particularly Figure 4, the number and identity of authors have been erratic, with some publishing only on one issue and dropping out, and others maintaining a more stable presence. The amount of works produced by each single author changed as well, as a consequence of the dynamics explained in the previous section. Li Ruo, for example, was one of the authors with the longest list of titles until 2017, then she has consistently remained on the table of contents, but with a considerably reduced quantity. The arrangement of authors' line-up is also suggestive of an informal ranking system, possibly to highlight group members who had most distinguished themselves during the year, and again to boost their enthusiasm. The first two names in 2015 were Ji Tong and Xue Ting, replaced by Li Ruo and Xiao Hai in 2016. The first place in 2017 was unsurprisingly held by Fan Yusu, followed by Ji Tong, who had just left, Li Ruo, who was about to, and Jin Hongyang, a new entry. Fan Yusu kept the first place in 2018 too, followed by Xiao Hai (with 77 pages all to himself), but lost it to Li Ruo in 2019, herself followed by Xu Liangyuan and Li Wenli 李文丽, a domestic worker who has since become a highly prolific author

of prose and poetry alike, well connected also with other self-organised groups of domestic workers and grassroots creative writing workshops in Beijing (see Figure 7). Most of the volumes have also an appendix of short essays of critique or introduction to the group. In addition to *Picun wenxue*, individual anthologies have also been published for Xiao Hai, Li Ruo and Xu Liangyuan (all will be referenced to in the chapters about these authors).

工友之家皮村文学小组作品集 01



# 皮村文学

(第一辑)

——工友之家文学小组作品集 (2014—2015)

北京·皮村

2015年

Figure 6 - The first volume of *Picun wenxue*.

These publications promote the idea of a “Picun literature.” In other words, they adopt a community-oriented approach, framing the PLC as somewhat promoting, improving and enlivening the cultural life of a remote urban village in Beijing. There were no explicit references to migrant workers’ literature, although of course the boundary between a production overtly presented as such and literary works produced by a group animated by and addressed to a community of migrant workers is quite thin. Yet, it may be a sign of a lack of subjective identification with a larger body of (migrant) workers’ literature, with all its theoretical and practical implications, or at least with what was immediately identifiable with it (such as *dagong* poetry from Guangdong), and instead a



concept of literary production from below centred more on the local community. This approach was not fundamentally altered even after the yearly publication changed its name to *Laodongzhe de shi yu ge* 劳动者的诗与歌 (*Labourers' Poems and Songs*) in 2017. Nevertheless, other instances point to different direction as well, suffice to say that Sun Heng was among the poets included in the landmark 2007 anthology of migrant workers' poetry (see chapter Two).

	<i>Picun wenxue</i> 2015	<i>Picun wenxue</i> 2016	<i>Laodongzhe shi yu ge</i> 2017	<i>Laodongzhe shi yu ge</i> 2018	<i>Laodongzhe shi yu ge</i> 2019
<b>Top three authors line-up</b>	Ji Tong	Li Ruo	Fan Yusu	Fan Yusu	Li Ruo
	Xue Ting	Xiao Hai	Ji Tong	Xiao Hai	Xu Liangyuan
	Wang Xiucui	Ji Tong	Li Ruo	Li Ruo	Wang Chengxiu

Figure 7 - Top authors line-up in the table of contents of annual printed publications.

In 2019 the group decided to diversify its publications. *Laodongzhe de shi yu ge* remained as the group's yearly internal publication, but it was now accompanied by a bimonthly whose first issue came out on 1 May 2019, called *Xin gongren wenxue* 新工人文学 (*New Workers' Literature*). The concept of new workers' literature has already been illustrated in the previous section. As a matter of fact, the first issue of *Xin gongren wenxue* carried a shortened and updated version of Zhang Huiyu's essay pointing out the basic characteristics of new workers' literature, which essentially repeated the passages quoted above, but also stressed more on its political correctness, presenting it as "an integral part of the China story and the China experience" (中国故事和中国经验的有机组成部分) and "an essential new force in the garden of the literature and art of the people and the masses in the New Era" (新时代人民文艺、群众文艺大花园中不可或缺的新生力量).<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Zhang Zhiyu [Zhang Huiyu], "Ling yi zhong wenhua shuxie" (2019), 2.

The idea to launch a journal came primarily by Zhang Huiyu, but it was also the fruit of a reflection on China's literary history and the role played by literary journals.<sup>68</sup> The cultural memory of *Xin qingnian*, and above all the thriving scene of literary associations and cultural societies that populated the field of literary creation of early-20th-century China, each with their own journal as a way to spread both their members' works and unique vision of literature,<sup>69</sup> still exerts a powerful influence in this respect, although the discourse can be expanded and brought closer to the present time by including the vast scene of unofficial journals that sprung up starting from the 1980s to publish poetry outside of state channels. Although such journals were produced under drastically different circumstances, and with very different goals, what they share with *Xin gongren wenxue* is not only the unmissable caption "for internal distribution," but also, most importantly, the attempt to create a "safe space" for producing a distinct aesthetics, practicing it, and discussing it. The creation of a self-administered space to liberate creative alternatives to the traditional/dominant aesthetic ideology and cultural authorities is also a characteristic that bridges *Xin gongren wenxue* and *Xin qingnian*, all through unofficial poetry journals (although, as we have seen and will continue to see, migrant workers' literature's relationship with dominant aesthetic is not one of thorough rejection). Finally, another illustrious precedent was of course *Dagong shiren*, with which the activists of the Home share a relation of appreciative recognition, demonstrated by the fact that the journal features prominently in the Art and Culture Museum—and they do so even more than PLC members themselves.

While up until that moment publications by the PLC had focused on authors that were—or had been—physically in Picun, or had participated in the group, the journal was meant to be "a shared platform" (共同的平台)<sup>70</sup> for workers in general to contribute. New workers' literature was

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<sup>68</sup> Interview in Beijing, 9 December 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Hockx, *Questions of Style*.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Zhang Huiyu in Beijing, 9 December 2019.

not meant to be a Picun trademark then, but a broad concept that would include all those who adhered to the basic traits illustrated by Lü Tu and Zhang Huiyu. Nevertheless, the journal's leadership has firmly remained in the hands of the PLC. Fan Yusu is the nominal director (*zhubian* 主编), and from that capacity she writes the editorial for each issue. Most of the actual job is done by Wan Huashan (also thanks to his professional editing skills), first co-director with Fan (May–November 2019) and then executive director (*zhixing zhubian* 执行主编), and Fu Qiuyun, the editor-in-chief (*bianjibu zhuren* 编辑部主任). The editorial board is made up of PLC members, who rotate in assisting Wan and Fu as additional executive directors. Finally, there is an editorial committee with advisory functions (*bianweihui* 编委会) composed of a mix of activists and mediators, notably Wang Dezhi, Li Yunlei, Liu Chen, Shi Libin, and, naturally, Zhang Huiyu.

In line with this outward projection, besides the first issue, which contains virtually only authors who have participation in the PLC to some degree, the journal later has privileged authors with no connection with the group. The PLC maintains its centrality through a special session which occupies each issue's central part, focused on one single group member, who also appears on the cover. Of course, it also maintains exclusive authority over the criteria adopted for admission. Such criteria were laid out by Wan Huashan in a postscript he wrote for the first issue, where he said that *Xin gongren wenxue* seeks after works with “adherence to the times and realist taste, to reach an increasing range of labourers' spiritual requirements, promote the dignity and value of labour, and, by means of literature, reflect this great era of rapid transformations, and workers' real life and feelings of workers” (带有时代性和现实感，是为了达成更多劳动者的精神诉求，倡导劳动的尊严与价值，以文学的方式反映这个快速变迁的大时代，劳动者本真的生活与情感).<sup>71</sup> He continues by outlining specific requirements for each genre: nonfiction should have both social and literary impact, fiction should be based on realism, poetry must be about workers,

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<sup>71</sup> Wan Huashan, “Bianhouji.”

*sanwen* should be written by workers themselves with emotional intensity. The emphasis on workers' authorship (pieces should be written *by* them) and on the instrument of realism (stories should be *about* them) seems motivated by the assumption that the ensemble of these two factors will make it easier for this literature to be also attractive for workers' readership (and therefore be *for* them), something that objectively constitutes a contribution by *Xin gongren wenxue* to the vexed debates on the nature of working-class literature that have been carried out in China and globally since the early 20th century, showing once again that the questions they raised remain valid for practitioners today.

*Xin gongren wenxue* is then more than one more chapter in the rich trajectory of Picun-based publications. It is also an effort by the PLC to step in a wider scene of worker-produced literature, offering a space for worker authors from across China to share their work, and possibly discuss. In doing so, it spreads the concept of new workers, advancing it as a valid alternative to the socially- and symbolically-compromised *nongmingong* or even *dagong*. In short, *Xin gongren wenxue* offers itself as a focal point for contemporary workers' literature in China, also capitalising on the group's fame following Fan Yusu. In other words, it is no longer just *Picun* literature. Of course, this expansion of the range of authors ascribable to new workers' literature is not devoid of problems and limits. The latter include the fact that, despite everything, and although it has also carried some famous names from the migrant-worker poetry scene, including Zheng Xiaoqiong and Chen Nianxi 陈年喜 (who features in the *Wo de shipian* film, in addition to the anthology), *Xin gongren wenxue* still has a long way to go before acquiring the notoriety it aspires to. Other problems can be of various nature, last but not least internal ones. On 28 December 2019, an open forum on the journal was held on the side-line of the Second Labourers' Literature Prize, chaired by Zhang Huiyu. Guest lecturers of the group for that semester were especially invited and expected to speak, and they included Li Yaya—whose position as *Shiyue* understandably created some anticipation on the advice she could give, but several PLC members were there, and anyone could intervene. (It was at

this forum that Tie Xiao and I suggested the journal open a section on foreign translations.) On that occasion, Fan Yusu voiced her dissatisfaction at the drastic decrease of PLC members published in the journal, debating with Wan Huashan on this, who vigorously defended the external reach adopted by *Xin gongren wenxue*.

Another issue is of aesthetic nature, which concerns the PLC as a whole, in addition to *Xin gongren wenxue* strictly speaking, and it is whether they will be able to develop their own art, with its rules, goals, themes and styles, or will prevalently seek after recognition on the part of the cultural elite. The two aspects do not necessarily exclude each other, especially when recognition from the establishment is a way to boost one's visibility rather than an aesthetic surrender. For sure, the PLC is greatly exposed to the influence of the establishment through some of its mediators. This is vividly shown in the appearance itself of *Xin gongren wenxue*: while it is a substantial graphic improvement from *Picun wenxue*, it clearly owes a considerable deal to the layout of *Beijing wenxue*, which not incidentally is largely distributed among PLC members. If mediators are an example of the inner workings of the PLC literary mode of production, this trait is a visual demonstration of the group's coexistence and interaction with the dominant LMP. Nevertheless, *Xin gongren wenxue* maintains the potential to become a space where a wholly new aesthetics is practiced. Future developments in the creative practice of the PLC and *Xin gongren wenxue* will shed new light over such dynamics.

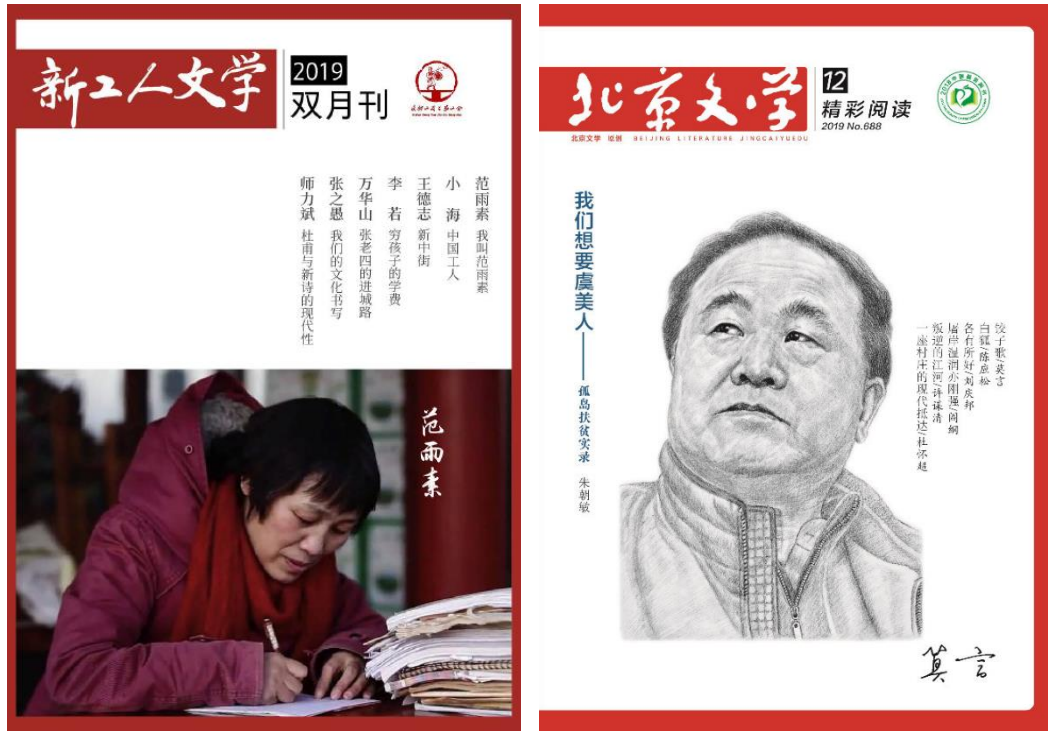


Figure 8 - The first issue of Xin gongren wenxue (left) and Beijing wenxue (right). The resemblance is evident.

### 3.4. The triangulation of forces in the practice of the Picun Literature Group

The cultural activities promoted by the Home, and above all by the PLC, have turned Picun into a sort of heterotopia for migrant workers with an interest in culture. Heterotopias, according to Foucault, who coined the term, are spaces who have the “property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.”<sup>72</sup> Picun partly fits in the description at least for two reasons. First, it is a space where migrant workers’ cultural invisibility (i.e. unfaithful representation or misrepresentation on the part of others than themselves) and anonymity (i.e. lack of resources to sustain their cultural activity, publication, etc.) are subverted and turned into their opposite, i.e. migrant workers’ centrality in cultural production and fruition. Second, it is able to convey a sense

<sup>72</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 22.

of home and solidarity within an urban space otherwise associated with anomie, solitude and strangeness. The numerous reference to Picun as *guxiang*, a second home, and similar expressions are strongly indicative of this fact.

Despite being a heterotopia in these senses, Picun—like any space—is not immune from the overarching relations of the social formation where it is located, which are far from being neutralised (as Foucault's explanation goes). This is evident in the functioning of what can be considered, following Eagleton's terminology, a literary mode of production. Texts produced in the context of the PLC—and the whole cultural practice carried out in Picun more generally—are subject to the influence of several different agents. Authors are just one of them, joined by activists and mediators, as well as occasional publishers when such dynamics extend to other actors who have never properly participated in PLC-related activities as mediators. The practice of the group, considered organically, is the result of the interplay of such forces. The same can be told even for individual literary works themselves, as their authors are equally exposed to this plurality of influences, which help determine such choices as those pertaining genre and style, for example. Microscopically, this is evident from the operations of *Xin gongren wenxue*, which sees activists, authors, and mediators together in mapping out its creative orientations.

Perhaps the finest example to show the interplay of the three sets of agents—authors, activists and mediators—that constitute the cultural practice of the PLC is the very concept of new workers' literature. We have seen how the idea of new workers was first advanced by Home-based activists to claim their socio-historical subjecthood and dignity, and then adopted by Zhang Huiyu—whom we have characterised halfway between a mediator and a figure internal to the group—for what concerns the literary output of the PLC as well, becoming so determining that the group itself was renamed the New Workers' Literature Group, and that the term also gives the group's journal its name. Mediators may have different agendas, but generally it is subalternity, however intended, that constitutes the basis upon which the cultural establishment receives and promotes the PLC

(although of course not all mediators are also part of the higher cultural elite themselves, despite being in a more favourable position within the establishment). Individual authors, on their part, tend to have very different ideas about what the concept implies for themselves. Based on the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork, close to none understood new workers' literature with the theoretical implications it is meant to have. For some, it is just a term like *dagong*, while others agree with the idea that the latter word is pejorative. Others see being new workers as a starting point, which does not exhaust their full artistic sensibility, to be assessed on strictly artistic terms. Many simply do not care (as will be further elaborated in the interviews reported in the next chapters).

This triangulation also impacts the profound nature of (new) workers' literature as it is practiced in Picun. It is admissible to wonder what are the gains that come from publishing in official spaces such as *Beijing wenxue*. A particular question in that respect would be whether the goal is to bolster the visibility of individual authors or workers' literature in general, and in the latter case what would be the point if not to seek recognition on the part of cultural authorities, which would realistically result, in the last analysis, in the emergence of some individual authors over all the others. Similarly, it is questionable whether emulating the establishment, for example by setting up a prize openly inspired from famous literary awards, jeopardises the critical rethinking of dominant aesthetic standards. During a debate on the culture of labour held in Picun in January 2009, participants discussed whether it would be advisable to aspire to "become mainstream," i.e. to *zhuliuhua* 主流化. Wang Dezhi observed that a workers' cultural practice makes sense if it seeks to establish its own subjectivity, *zhutixing* 主体性, through its cooperative dimension, avoiding the anomie and isolation that would be endemic to worker authors' attempts to access mainstream culture on an individual basis. Writing about a similar question, Sun Heng insisted that "it is only by erecting our standards and principles that we can walk a completely different path and create an entirely new culture" (建立起我们自己的标准和规则, 只有这样我们才可能走出一条全新的道



路、创造出全新的文化)。<sup>73</sup> These are all provocative questions, trying to ponder on the manifold implications of the interplay of different agents, but like already said above access to the cultural elite and the creation of a new cultural practice do not have to be mutually exclusive, and their interaction can be navigated to the advantage of the latter.

At the source of these questions lies the fact that the PLC was not born to engage in workers' writing specifically. It was born to let individuals with little to no means to produce culture, who also happen to be migrant workers, to start writing and to circulate what they write. Theirs is a literature not thought to be marketed and sold, but rather read, recited and spread. Such conception, while far from the various incarnations of the revolutionary literature in the first half of the 20th century, is more akin to the enterprise carried out by the intellectuals of New Culture, up until the Obscure poets and post-socialist avant-garde poetry in general. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the people it addresses—and that take part in it—are workers. This is particularly evidenced by the adoption of the new workers' literature "brand," and its emphasis on authors' social identity. This compels us to rethink the force field of workers' literature as one with often porous boundaries, not a place where you are either in or out, but where you can—and you often are—simultaneously in and out. This may be less true for those who theorise it, and who have very clear ideas on the criteria that allow a certain literary work to be part of workers' literature, than for those who actually produce it. Workers' literature can be understood narrowly, as a practice consciously carried out by its agents, or also broadly, encompassing also those who are not writing with the explicit goal in mind to produce something called *workers' literature*, but that we can consider to be part of it if one of our criteria is the class origin of the authors we wish to study. The next chapters will attempt to reach a dialectical understanding of this contradictory situation by zooming in on some individual authors from the PLC and their work.

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<sup>73</sup> Sun Heng, "Dui xin gongren wenhua," 90.

## **Part II**

### **Text**

**Chapter Four.**  
***The Literary Mind and the Carving of Workers' Literature: Fan Yusu***

Considering the importance of “Wo shi Fan Yusu” for the notoriety of the PLC, it is only natural to begin the thesis’ second part, dedicated to an analysis of texts and authors, by unpacking a number of thorny questions of contextual and textual nature arisen around the work of Fan Yusu, in particular if we consider how they involve fundamental issues about the production of the PLC as a whole. Since her sudden rise to fame, Fan herself has become the public face of the group. She appears frequently on the media (although others have been joining her more and more often, particularly Wan Huashan and Xiao Hai), speaks at public events sponsored or participated by the PLC, and is sought after by scholars and journalists interested in Picun’s cultural life. In addition, as already mentioned, she currently serves as the editor-in-chief of *Xin gongren wenxue*, and also appeared as the cover person of the journal’s first issue.

This notwithstanding, it would be wrong to assume that she has been reduced to being a mere figurehead, exploited to bolster the PLC’s visibility or to the advantage of commentators interested in propagating workers’ literature. This interpretation would not only be heavily limited, but also reinforcing some prejudicial commentaries that see Fan Yusu as a pawn in the hands of leftist academicians who possesses no talent of her own. She had to defend herself from similar conjectures after “Wo shi Fan Yusu” was published. In her own words,

我从来奢望去当文学家，却在今年 4 月份，偶遇了一场沙尘暴，因为一篇文章，莫名其妙地地成了网红。有人看了我的文章，说那是北大人代笔的，说有人要把我一个目不识丁的育儿嫂推进文学的殿堂。我不明白，文学的殿堂都已经站满了？我走不进去，只能被人推进去？

I never hoped to become a writer, but a sand storm hit me in April this year. Due to a piece I wrote, I became a star of the internet, to my surprise. Some who read my piece said that it was actually written by Peking University people, that someone wanted to push an illiterate nanny into the temple of literature. I don't understand—is the temple of literature perhaps already full? And am I unable to enter it, unless someone pushes me in?<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Fan's literary value has been questioned gives us the opportunity to turn our attention to the problem of aesthetics again, and specifically, as aptly summarised by Watten, on “the ‘literary’ as a point of departure for discussing the nature of aesthetic alternatives.”<sup>2</sup> The chapter does so first by critically presenting the points of view emerged during the vibrant mediatic and scholarly discussion on Fan's work, which reveal a number of positive and negative prejudices or a division of standpoints that can be framed within the dichotomy of social significance versus aesthetic value.<sup>3</sup> The chapter then proceeds by examining her work more closely (although she has written more than just “Wo shi Fan Yusu,” my analysis will concentrate on the memoir, to critically reference the wider discussion, but will also expand to other works by her). This is the principal reason why the title of the chapter deliberately evokes the influential treatise on aesthetics of the 5th century CE, *Wenxin diao long* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*), authored by the literary theoretician Liu Xie 劉勰 (although with a certain poetic license, as the “carving of dragons” referred to a specific style of argumentation). The argument that this chapter aims to substantiate is precisely that Fan Yusu demonstrates that there is a complex literary mind behind workers' literature, and not just plain reportage or an aesthetically unrefined intent that poses no challenge to what is commonly understood as “the literary.”

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<sup>1</sup> Fan Yusu, “Women mei shenme butong,” 16.

<sup>2</sup> Watten, “Bride of the Assembly Line,” 164.

<sup>3</sup> Van Crevel, “The Cultural Translation.”

A short methodological note is due. Fan Yusu the author, “Wo shi Fan Yusu” and the media phenomenon that followed its publication can be analysed from a plurality of perspectives. Consistent with this dissertation’s intention to explore contemporary forms of worker literature by bridging studies on 20th-century working-class culture and Chinese literature studies, the present case study will not be integrated with the existing scholarship on internet literature in China, because that would involve further considerations on production and fruition that would lead us astray from the main argument.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.1. Who is Fan Yusu?

The story behind “Wo shi Fan Yusu” begins in 2014. Back then, Fan Yusu was already an enthusiastic participant in the activities of the Migrant Workers Home. As seen in chapter Three, it was she, alongside a few others, who voiced the need for a specific group on literature. She had always been fond of reading, devouring book after book in her childhood, and keeping that habit also after entering adulthood. Her literary knowledge is indeed impressive, and ranges from China’s classical and modern literature to foreign literatures. However, she had written basically nothing before joining the PLC. She was also not one of the most prolific writers of the group, with only five works of her appearing in the first two issues of *Picun wenxue*. Despite her importance and the quality of her work, to date she has remained one who does not publish a lot. She even stopped attending the PLC meetings in 2015, after Zhang Huiyu went abroad, which concurred with her finding a job downtown, very far away from Picun.<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, editors of the popular online-based news outlet *Zhengwu* 正午 (*Noon*), on the look out for new stories, read Fan Yusu’s stories on *Picun wenxue* and asked her to write something for

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<sup>4</sup> Fan is cited as a prime example of Internet literature, and especially its possibilities for subaltern or amateur authors, by Duan Guozhong, “Chinese Internet Literature.”

<sup>5</sup> Interview on 2 November 2019.

their website. According to the editors, Fan Yusu stood out because she did not easily adapt to “the conventional subjects, stories and language that most of people attribute to ‘migrant workers’ literature’ or ‘subaltern literature’” (不符合大多数人对‘打工文学’或‘底层写作’界定的主题、故事和语言).<sup>6</sup> In their eyes, she must have looked quite unlike other group members who monotonously wrote about their life in Beijing, their gratitude to the group and its lecturers, and so on. As we read in the *Zhengwu* editorial note (*bianzhe’an* 编者按) to her story, “her writing is relaxed, with a somewhat hardly replicable sense of humour, and with a kind of violent force that spurts out at times” (她文笔轻盈, 有种难以模仿的独特幽默感, 有时也有种强烈的力量喷薄而出). Fan Yusu herself was not so self-confident when she submitted her memoir, which was published on 25 April 2017. “It came out at noon, at night I found out it had become viral” (中午出来的, 到晚上我就知道很火了),<sup>7</sup> Fan recalls. In a very few days, it had more than three million reads. The first (and so far only) complete English translation came out on 10 May, done by Manya Koetse for *What’s on Weibo*. Later, the original piece was republished in the 2017 volume of *Laodongzhe de shi yu ge* and also as the opening piece of the first issue of *Xin gongren wenxue*.

Here is where the stories *behind* and *in* “Wo shi Fan Yusu” conflate. “Wo shi Fan Yusu” is a memoir of its author’s life, constructed in non-linear progression, with frequent uses of analepses, temporal and spatial displacements, and carefully-constructed profiles of people who make relevant appearances, her mother above all. The opening lines, that will be discussed in more depth later, read:

我的生命是一本不忍卒读的书, 命运把我装订得极为拙劣。

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Bao, “Guanyu Fan Yusu.”

<sup>7</sup> Interview on 2 November 2019.

我是湖北襄阳人，12岁那年在老家开始做乡村小学的民办老师。如果我不离开老家，一直做下去，就会转成正式教师。

我不能忍受在乡下坐井观天的枯燥日子，来到了北京。我要看看大世界。那年我20岁。

My life is a book too hard to read, so clumsily has fate bound me.

I come from Xiangyang, Hubei province. At 12 I started doing private teaching at the village school.

Had I not left my hometown and continued teaching, I would have become a proper teacher.

But I could not stand those dry days spent like the frog looking at the sky from the bottom of the well.

So I came to Beijing. I wanted to see the world. I was 20 back then.<sup>8</sup>

The opening lines can be described as programmatic, rapidly sketching out Fan's profile. The text continues with Fan already in Beijing, and she quickly goes through her adult life. She presents herself as unable to do anything meaningful there because she was "lazy" (懒散) and slow at work (she was then employed at a restaurant). She marries an abusive man and has two daughters with him, but then she decides to take them back to Hubei to flee from him. She later lost track of him, and suggests that he may be dead somewhere in Russia, calling him a drunkard. Elsewhere she wrote that surviving has been her greatest success in her lifetime.<sup>9</sup> The first chapter closes with Fan's proposition to be single mother, which is done with a palpable sense of pride: "I went back home and told my mother that, from now on, I would be raising my two daughters alone" (我回到了老家，告诉母亲，以后我要独自带着两个女儿生活了).<sup>10</sup> These are the three main characteristics she claims from herself in the overture: unfortunate, bad at work, independent.

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<sup>8</sup> Fan Yusu, "Wo shi Fan Yusu," 7.

<sup>9</sup> Fan Yusu, "Beipiao rizi," 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

The second chapter jumps back to Fan's childhood and introduces her family. She also reveals that she changed her name from Fan Juren 范菊人 (literally, "chrysanthemum girl") to Fan Yusu (yusu 雨素 roughly translates as "the nature of rain") when she was 12 after reading the romance novel *Yanyu mengmeng* 烟雨蒙蒙 (*Fire and Rain*) by Chiung Yao 琼瑶 (b. 1938), and she wanted to have the word for *rain*, *yu* 雨, in her name. She then introduces her older brother, whose delusions of becoming a famous writer bring financial issues to the family and complicate his search for a wife. Fan even compares him to Lu Xun's Kong Yiji 孔乙己, the old intellectual whose constant show-off of outdated knowledge cannot save him from the jokes and despise of people around him. We then read about Fan's older sister, who had a meningitis at a very young age that left her mentally disabled, and younger sister, who also had to struggle with consequences of polio. What ties all these misadventures together is the love and generosity put in action by their mother to support them all. Their mother is presented in a triumphant fashion:

我的母亲，叫张先芝，生于1936年7月20日。她在14岁那年，因能说会道，善帮人解决矛盾，被民主选举为妇女主任。从1950年开始干，执政了40年，比萨达姆、卡扎菲这些政坛硬汉子的在位时间都长。不过，这不是我服气母亲的原因。

My mother's name is Zhang Xianzhi. She was born on 20 July 1936. At 14, since she had an excellent rhetoric and was good at solving problems, she was democratically elected chair of the village's women. She took up the job in 1950, and held it for forty years. She ruled even longer than such tough strongmen as Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi. However, this is not the reason why I admire my mother.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem.*



Her successful support for her family appears to be the main reason for Fan's admiration. No child starved to death, no one complained about food, she specifies, and all thanks to her mother. She is further magniloquently characterised as speaking "with a leader's demeanour" (家邦的架式) and having "awe-inspiring prestige" (凛凛威风). Her father, by contrast, was a negligible presence that largely failed to take up his responsibilities with the family, and he is therefore pictured like "the shadow of a big tree" (大树的影子).<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly, family played a crucial role in Fan's creative motivation. The first piece she ever wrote was "Nongmin dage" 农民大哥 (Peasant Older Brother), dedicated to the story of her brother, which she partly incorporated in "Wo shi Fan Yusu". Originally, the title of the memoir itself was to be "Muqin" 母亲 (Mother), but it was changed on the editor's suggestion.<sup>13</sup>

Her passion for reading is introduced in the third chapter. She was an avid reader of Chinese and European literature, and she mentions Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), Maksim Gorky (1868–1936), Hao Ran 浩然 (1932–2008), Jin Jingmai 金敬迈 (1930–2020), Jules Verne (1828–1905). Her literary passion made her crave for exploration and adventure. At 12, during the summer holiday, she decided to leave home and went south, to Hainan island, where she remained for three months. She wanted to feel like the heroes of her *zhiqing* novels, sneaking into trains and stealing fruit from trees or food from garbage bins. The adult Fan acknowledges that the situation was not so idyllic, and that she could have found herself in serious trouble: "Human traffickers didn't spot my gender, and didn't put their eyes on me" (人贩子辨认不出我的性别, 也没盯上我).<sup>14</sup> When she finally returns home, she is scolded and despised by family members for

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*: 7–8.

<sup>13</sup> This information was first shared with me by Paola Iovene and Zhang Huiyu, to whom I express my gratitude. It is also reported in Ai Xiang, "Fan Yusu," 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 9.

what she did. Again, her mother is the only exception. This experience brings about the first epiphany of the story:

这时候，十二岁的我清醒过来。在我们襄阳农村，儿娃子（男孩）离家出走几天，再回来，是稀松平常的事。而一个娘娃子（女孩）只要离家出走，就相当于古典小说的私奔罪。在我们村里，从来没有女孩这么做，我离家出走，成了德有伤、贻亲羞的人。

In that moment, at 12, I woke up. In our Xinyang countryside, boys leaving home and coming back after a few days was a trivial matter, totally normal. But if a girl only tried to leave, she would be guilty of eloping, like in classical novels. No one had ever done so in our village. By leaving, I had become morally corrupt, and I had brought shame upon my family.

A narrative contrast is created, however, as the chapter continues by presenting, in subtly grim fashion, the continuation of her siblings' life. All of them are shown as giving up their passions and aspirations to resign themselves to the dull country life and to unsatisfactory marriages. The contrast with the epiphany, and with Fan's desire to venture out into the world, is apparent.

The fourth chapter returns to the time of the story, while remaining spatially in Xiangyang, and emotionally in the dimension of this gender prejudice. From a narrative point of view, this jump effectively presents the chain of causes and effects that would produce what was to come next. We find Fan back home with her two daughters, but the stigma still weighs upon her, and only her mother is there to welcome her daughter and granddaughters. Here comes the second epiphany:

母亲没有帮助我的权力。母亲是政治强者，但她不敢和中国五千年的三纲五常对抗。爱我的母亲对我说，我的大娃子不上学了，不要紧，母亲每天会求告老天爷，祈求老天爷给她一条生路。

这个时候，我已明白，我没有家了。[...] 我已明白，我是生我养我的村庄的过客。我的两个孩子更是无根的水中飘萍。这个世界上只有母亲爱着我们了。

Mother didn't have the power to help me. She was strong politically, but she wouldn't dare to go against the Three Principles and Five Virtues of tradition. Mother loved me. She said that I didn't have to worry if my daughter didn't go to school, Mother would pray the Old Lord of Heavens for her, to find a path for her.

In that moment, I understood that I had no home anymore. [...] I understood that I was a guest in the very village that had nurtured me. My two daughters were even worse, like uprooted duckweed floating in the water. My mother was the only person in this world who loved us.<sup>15</sup>

This passage lays bare the structural gender discrimination that underpins Fan's decision to migrate out of her native village. Expelled from it, Fan and her daughters enter the floating population, here symbolised by the image of duckweed adrift. The not-so-subtle indictment of tradition, embodied by the mandates of social hierarchy and conformity to established norms, is remindful of Lu Xun's sharp critique of traditional moral codes undermining rural women's freedom and agency in "Zhufu" 祝福 (New Year's Sacrifice). Fan Yusu and her daughters are condemned for their breach of the traditional confinement of women to the inner space, *nei* 内, of the house and family, a social metonym for the rural place of origin, in this case. On the other hand, rootlessness is a common perceptive trope in migrant workers' fictional literature, and it is precisely what pushes Fan Yusu back to her migrant life, and back to Beijing.

The story continues with Fan landing a job at the home of a rich tycoon's mistress, where she had to take care of their infant second daughter. Although only described in a couple of paragraphs,

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 10.

the microcosm of the house—a “palace drama” (宫斗剧里)<sup>16</sup>—gives Fan the opportunity to observe and comment on the absurdity of the *nouveau riche*’s life, particularly the miserable existence of the mistress, totally dependent on a powerful man who has another wife. This leaves Fan wondering whether “I was living in the golden age of the Tang dynasty or in the Qing empire, rather than in socialist New China” (不知道自己是活在大唐盛世，还是大清帝国，还是社会主义新中国). Apart from that, Fan experiences the painful situation of having to take care of others’ children while leaving her own behind in Picun, where she had rented a flat: “Thinking of that, I could not avoid crying. At least it was in the middle of the night, so no one would see me” (想着，潸然泪下。还好是半夜三更，没人看见).<sup>17</sup>

This is where Fan begins her reflection on the condition of floating children (*liudong ertong* 流动儿童), that is, children who follow their parents in migration, as opposed to left-behind children (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童). The acquaintances made by her daughters in Picun, who cannot go to the city’s public schools and whose parents will not send them to unofficial school because of their poor quality, give Fan the opportunity to expand her discussion on the condition of migrant children in general, and to lambast the official authorities, specifically naming the Ministry of Education, for taking insufficient action to tackle these problems. This attention to children, which continues also in the next chapter of the story, will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

The fifth chapter describes Picun and Fan’s life there, with a colourful digression to discuss her own habit to visit flea markets and waste collection stations to grab books for her daughters. She introduces her participation in the activities of the Migrant Workers Home and the literature group;

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

on the *Zhengwu* website, this part is accompanied by pictures showing Fan reading aloud her works at a literature group meeting, as well as of papers with her handwriting.

In conclusion, the sixth chapter oscillates between the city and the countryside, seemingly in an attempt to create a sort of conjunction. Fan's mother calls to inform her that she has taken part in an action to protest against an operation of land grab at their village. The land should be used for the building of a high-speed train station, but the compensation for farmers is low. Fan, reporting her mother's words, reports how authorities reacted violently by dispatching thugs to disrupt the protestors, leaving some wounded. Eventually, the protest fails and the land is bought away. However, the episode compels Fan to feel one more surge of admiration for her old mother, and to conclude "Wo shi Fan Yusu" with a moral proposition, again in odour of Lu Xun, this time reverting his famous character Ah Q's attitude of despising and taking it on weaker people into a sort of solidarity among the downtrodden:

我来到大城市求生，成为社会底层的弱者。作为农村强者的女儿，经常受到城里人的白眼和欺侮。这时，我想：是不是人遇到比自己弱的人就欺负，能取得生理上的快感？或者是基因复制？从那时起，我有了一个念头，我碰到每一个和我一样的弱者，就向他们传递爱和尊严。

After coming to the city to seek for a living, I became part of the weak at the lower rungs of society. As the daughter of a strong rural woman, I often had to suffer the disdainful looks of city people and to endure their bullying. In that moment, I thought: Isn't it that people like to bully those who are weaker than them, to obtain some sort of physiological delight? Or is it a matter of genetic reproduction? From that moment on, I had an idea: Every time I would meet another weak person like me, I would pass on love and respect to them.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

“Wo shi Fan Yusu” can be described as the vivid account of the intersectional oppression suffered by rural-to-urban migrant women in China, in response to the misrepresentation and “controlling gaze” found in media constructions of them.<sup>19</sup> This intersection occurs at the multiple levels of gender and class. Race is not there, of course, although its dispositions can be seen in action in the discrimination suffered by migrant workers due to their rural origin and the lack of urban household registration. Likewise, it can be read as the unfiltered tale of a migrant single mother who has resisted through endless ordeals, and now gets to speak out. Probably it is the latter aspect that has made its fortune, also at the expense of a deeper discussion on the structural conditions it invites to lay bare, even when contributing in coating them in mere personal misbehaviour.

#### **4.2. The media case and beyond**

The sudden fame that came with the publication of “Wo shi Fan Yusu” naturally attracted substantial attention on the part of the media and academia. The outer aspects of Fan Yusu’s success and virality are analysed by the literary critic Chen Yong 陈雍 in an essay published in 2019. In the article, she singles out three main characteristics behind the sudden visibility of non-specialist writers like Fan. The first is the “instrument”, i.e. the new media, chiefly the internet and social media, in a process that she calls the media’s “internet-isation” (网络化). The internet is key because it allows non-specialist writers to publish in autonomy. Instead of going through traditional forms of manuscript submission, they are noticed there, and first forwarded there by other netizens before being possibly republished elsewhere. The second characteristic is their identity labels: they are usually presented as lower-class, peasants, vulnerable, “not the writer you would expect,” and anyway outside the elite. The third characteristic is the mass readership made possible by the

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<sup>19</sup> Sun Wanning, *Subaltern China*.

internet, which is naturally a blessing, but also potentially a threat, if non-specialist writers become dependent on the moods and mainstreams of their online readers.<sup>20</sup>

Much of what has been written since then has mainly followed the two directions of the game-changing impact of the internet for the production and circulation of non-specialist writers, and the tale of hardships and raw reality that emerged from the memoir. Considerably less has been dedicated to an analysis of the story also from a literary point of view. As it is often the case with workers' literature (see the last section in chapter Two), the general focus remains on *what* is being said, overlooking *how* it is being said. Addressing this second question is one way to give such works their full dignity as literary pieces.

On 26 April 2017, the day after “Wo shi Fan Yusu” was published, an article in *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 (*People's Daily*), signed by its commentator Zhang Tie 张铁 on 26 April 2017 suggested that the knot of the story was not its literary value: “Perhaps it is not so important whether her writing is good or bad” (写得好或者不好，可能并不太重要). Rather, Fan allowed us to see the endless possibilities offered by the internet and the persisting vitality of society, where “These ordinary enthusiasts of literature, while using language as a weapon to resist the desertification of the existent, have also added profundity to an age of superficiality” (这些普通的文学爱好者，在以语言为武器对抗存在的荒芜之时，也给予扁平化的时代以深度).<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, here nothing is said about the content of the story, but the *Renmin ribao* article is emblematic of a “trend” in the commentary that emphasises the newfound energy of literature in the hands of non-specialist writers, showing that there are still sparkles of culture in a society otherwise fallen for trivial passions.

In other instances, Fan's exposure of social issues becomes a sort of (unconscious?) “activism”: by writing about them, she helps readers to become aware of those problems,

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<sup>20</sup> Chen Yong, “Cong Yu Xiuhua dao Fan Yusu.”

<sup>21</sup> Zhang Tie, “Ganxie.”

compelling them to act. An article in *Zhongguo yishubao* 中国艺术报 (*China Arts Daily*) on 3 May 2017 by Gao Xiuqin 高秀钦 is explicit in this sense. The piece evokes a familiar reference by calling Fan “a Nora who has walked out” (出走的娜拉),<sup>22</sup> enlists the social problems unearthed by the memoir, and remarks that the only way to enhance the value of the “Fan Yusu phenomenon” (范雨素现象)—thus suggesting that it is actually talking in more general terms—would be to actually address those very problems at the institutional level.<sup>23</sup> This position was also articulated by none else than Zhang Huiyu, who also insisted that the emergence of Fan bespoke of the unaddressed necessity to guarantee access to cultural fruition and production on the part of the lower classes.<sup>24</sup> And of course, while these articles were published on institutional outlets,<sup>25</sup> an ocean of unofficial commentary appeared among netizens as well.<sup>26</sup> Text outpours into context and vice versa, but it

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<sup>22</sup> The reference being the female protagonist of the play *A Doll House* by Henrik Ibsen, well known to Chinese readers mainly thanks to the sharp critique done by Lu Xun in his “Nuola zouhou zenyang” 娜拉走后怎样 (What Happens After Nora Walks Out), an essay from 1923. Setting off from the play’s end, where Nora turns down her superimposed gender role as wife and mother by walking out of the house, Lu Xun observed that Nora will have no other choice but to return home or end up in material degradation. Through this example, Lu Xun wanted to stress that individual independence for women was actually unattainable without socioeconomic independence.

<sup>23</sup> Gao Xiuqin, “Guanyu Fan Yusu.”

<sup>24</sup> Zhang Huiyu, “Ruhe rang Fan Yusumen.”

<sup>25</sup> Other early responses that appeared on journals and newspapers are collected in Zhao Zhanghe, “Fan Yusu shijian.”

<sup>26</sup> It is not within the scope of this chapter to investigate how ordinary netizens reacted to “Wo shi Fan Yusu”, since, as already stated in the introduction, that would lead us to another direction more focused on the “internet side” of the story. However, it may be worthy to spend a few remarks on a curious piece appeared on the blog of “Bobofu keji” 波波夫科技 (Popov Science and Technology), on 27 April, with the title “Dang Ma Yuan yushang Fan Yusu” 当马原遇上范雨素 (When Jack Ma Bumped Into Fan Yusu). The piece is of interest because it remains along the same lines summed up above, but it unexpectedly compares Fan Yusu with the tycoon Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba. The author draws his inspiration from the unlikely encounter of the two in his WeChat feed: on 25 April, while Fan’s story was



should be pointed out that the implied reader is always supposed to be upper-class, with some sort of institutional leverage, be she or he in public administrations, newspapers or educational institutions, and the point of view is distinctively middle-class.

Other (fewer) essays address Fan on more specifically textual grounds. You Cuiping 游翠萍 examines the level of language and observes that, while subaltern narrations stand by definition on the opposite side to the mainstream, “when subalterns want to express their voice, something surprising occurs, as they willingly or unwillingly respond to narrative patterns established by the mainstream strata” (底层想发出自己的声音时, 却往往不期然、有意或无意地应和了主流的阶层叙事模式), i.e. the intellectuals and the middle class. Such language is based more in irony, articulated constructions and individual sensitivity than referential immediacy. This expressive form, You suggests, helps overcoming somewhat dichotomic simplifications or superficial fetishisation of subaltern writers, precisely because it is not what readers would expect based on “the subaltern identity intentionally stressed by the media” (媒体故意强调的底层身份).<sup>27</sup> Xi Zhiwu 席志武 adopts a perspective based on social space to discuss the literary implications embedded in Fan’s memoir. According to Xi, the world Fan—as the epitome of the migrant worker—wishes to venture into is actually “a beautiful imaginary construction of one space by another space” (居于一个空间对另一个空间的美好想象), namely of the city by the countryside, whose impact with the adverse

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coming out, Jack Ma was participating in a panel on empowerment and small business for the E-Commerce Week under the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. There, he recalled his time before Alibaba, when he worked as a university lecturer, and the author of the blog connects this with Fan’s past as a village school teacher, suggesting that Jack Ma’s call for enhancing institutional support for small enterprises could be helpful for people in the lower rungs of society. While this wishful position is reflexive of the neoliberal mentality focused on individual success rather than on structural conditions, it also shows the level of pervasiveness reached by public discussions on Fan Yusu in spring 2017 (Bobofu, “Dang Ma Yuan”).

<sup>27</sup> You Cuiping, “Cong ‘Fan Yusu wanghong Shijian,’” 140.

reality produces a double “isolation” (隔离) from the now-left-behind space of the countryside and the inaccessible space of the city. Xi holds that the subjective effects of this isolation are palpable in Fan’s writing, particularly evident in its connection with the genre of “private writing” (*sirenhua xiezu* 私人化写作), that was enormously successful in the 1990s. Although, as punctually remarked by Lingzhen Wang, the genre’s popularity should be contextualised within the marketisation of the publishing industry and the spectacularisation of the private (including sexuality),<sup>28</sup> it is nevertheless undisputable that private writing was influenced by and in turn influenced the introspective turn of postsocialist Chinese literature, also with a strong female consciousness, considering that its most representative authors were women, Chen Ran 陈染 and Lin Bai 林白 above all.

Curiously, however, Xi’s connection has less to do with the genre than with Fan’s approach to writing. For Xi, Fan’s style can be considered “private writing” for three main reasons: first, her passion and understanding of literature were nurtured privately (and, we may add, under adverse circumstances); second, her memoir reveals much of her private life, her relationship with her mother in particular; third, she was at first very elusive, apparently more annoyed than flattered by her own sudden publicity (which, again, brings us back and forth from text and context).<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in the effort to unpack Fan’s “ability at self-expression” (自我表述的能力),<sup>30</sup> Li Meng 李萌 stresses Fan’s “observing posture to conduct a cold reflection on the countryside and the city” (观察姿态对农村和城市进行冷静的思考); while the “observing posture” can be disputed, considering the numerous instances where Fan intervenes with explicitly critical remarks, Li’s argument holds that such “cold reflection” distances Fan from other instances of the practice, also literary, of

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<sup>28</sup> Lingzhen Wang, “Reproducing the Self.”

<sup>29</sup> Xi Zhiwu, “Chengxiang, diceng yu sirenhua.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, 225.

“speaking bitterness” (*suku* 诉苦), consisting in “the public expression of an individual’s woes with the intent to cultivate sympathy toward the speaker and outrage against those who caused his or her suffering.”<sup>31</sup> Particularly in use in the liberated areas during the revolution and in the early decades of the PRC, “speaking bitterness” was primarily an instrument of class struggle, as the performance of outrage was structured as an act of subjectivisation on the part of the oppressed. For Li, the main device at play in Fan’s “cold reflection” is doubt, or bafflement (以疑问的方式), rather than open indictment, however.<sup>32</sup>

Yet one more perspective, and a highly captivating one, is advanced by Ai Xiang 艾翔 in an article for the Tianjin-based journal *Wenxue ziyoutan* 文学自由谈 (*Free Talks on Literature*). Ai is callously anti-elitist in arguing that Fan Yusu has ripped literature away from high-brow writers, showing that it should not be “a rare resource under someone’s monopoly” (垄断的稀缺资源). Quite paradoxically, Ai continues, it has been her who has effectively realised the aspiration only lethargically pleaded for by professional writers to uplift literature from its current state of prostration (改变伏地状态走向直立). Not unlike other similar standpoints mentioned before, Ai also holds that Fan’s literature lays bare urgent social problems, and therefore the matter should not be whether “Wo shi Fan Yusu” respects alleged literary standards, but rather whether literature can serve the purpose sought after by Fan Yusu: “Hence, Fan Yusu’s literary creation should be the endpoint of our investigation. What we must reflect on is rather whether Kafka and magical realism are fitting for her writing” (因此范雨素的文学创作不应是我们观察的终点，我们需要思考的是卡夫卡、魔幻现实主义是否适合她的写作). Here, Kafka and magical realism can be read as substitutes for established aesthetics, given the symbolic authority they hold in China as signifiers of “high” or “pure” literature. In other words, Ai insightfully compels us to avoid judging subaltern

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<sup>31</sup> Javed, “Speaking Bitterness” (citing Perry, “Moving the Masses”).

<sup>32</sup> Li Meng, “Dangdai Zhongguo diceng funü.”

cultural productions according to established literary norms, suggesting instead to analyse whether such norms are adequate to subaltern expressions.

These questions surfaced in a controversy that arose after several commentators compared Fan to Yu Xiuhua 余秀华. A star of non-specialist poetry, Yu also became famous all of a sudden in 2014 after her poems, that she was posting online, were noticed by Liu Nian 刘年, an editor at *Shikan* 诗刊 (*Poetry*), China's main poetic journal, who actively supported her publication by major publishing houses and visibility.<sup>33</sup> Being a peasant woman affected by cerebral paralysis, Yu has also been framed as a grassroots author, or a significant Other of specialist writers.<sup>34</sup> The immense similarity between the two cases led commentators to call Fan “another Yu Xiuhua” (另一个余秀华), as both were united by being “not so ordinary” (不太一般), referring to the their highly spectacularised “identities [respectively] as ‘the poet with cerebral paralysis’ and a peasant woman” (“脑瘫诗人”以及农村妇女的身份).<sup>35</sup> However, Yu did not like the matching, presumably also out of an understandable loss of patience at being compared to other individuals (she was previously called China's Emily Dickinson). Shortly after “Wo shi Fan Yusu” went viral, Fan publicly commented that she did not consider herself “the next Yu Xiuhua” (下一个余秀华).<sup>36</sup> Later, Yu wrote a visibly annoyed comment by sharing “Who shi Fan Yusu” on her WeChat:

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<sup>33</sup> Among those who compare the two, see Chen Yong, “Cong Yu Xiuhua dao Fan Yusu;” Li Meng, “Dangdai Zhongguo diceng funü;” Liu Yingying, “Diceng shuxie.”

<sup>34</sup> It is also pertinent to point out that many extratextual aspects of the discussion on Fan Yusu, particularly the material function of her memoir to expose social reality and the urge to act concretely to uplift the conditions of people like her, can be found in the commentary surround Yu Xiuhua as well.

<sup>35</sup> Chen Yong, “Cong Yu Xiuhua dao Fan Yusu,” 136.

<sup>36</sup> Fenghuang, “Yu Xiuhua.”



余秀华

好，我说一下我的看法，希望记者不要烦我：一，文本不够好，离文学性差的远。二，每个生命自有来处和去处，不能比较。三，每个坚强的女人都很辛苦，不值得羡慕。四，我都不愿意和迪金森比较，何况是她。每个生命都是独一无二的。



我是范雨素 | 正午

22分钟前



企鹅号 读药

Alright, let me say a few things, in the hope that journalists won't come to harass me: 1) Text is not good enough, it's a long way to go from [having any] literary value; 2) Every life has an origin and a destination, they cannot be compared; 3) Every strong woman has gone through a lot, they are not worthy of any admiration; 4) I don't want to be compared to Emily Dickinson, let alone her. Every life is unique.

Yu was clearly reacting at a comparison she considered inappropriate, but in order to do so, she also brought “literariness” (*wenxuexing* 文学性) to the fore, bringing the polemics into the terrain of aesthetic ideology and proscription. Her reaction also escalated into a criticism of Fan herself, not only of an overly simplified comparison made by the media. Willy-nilly, Yu mobilised her symbolic capital to ascend to a position of authority (“I don't want to be compared to Emily Dickinson, *let alone* her,” my emphasis), acting like a gatekeeper and basing her gatekeeping strategy on the defence on an aesthetic common sense (ideology), the same common sense (ideology) that was initially levelled against Yu herself.

History tends indeed to repeat itself as tragedy. Yu herself was the target of a very similar criticism after she had become famous. In January 2015, Shen Haobo 沈浩波 attacked Yu's poetry precisely because, in his opinion, it was not sufficient in term of literary quality, and the main

reason why it was given much publicity was due to its author's disability, as labels sell well.<sup>37</sup> In passing, we cannot fail to notice here the endless irony of Shen himself owing his fame to the transgressive practice of Lower Body (*xiabanshen* 下半身) poetry, of which he was one of the main representatives, chastised at the time for being “a loss of face for literature,”<sup>38</sup> due to its explicit attention to sex and the wretched of society, and its scandalous language. Shen, in other words, was as avant-garde, outsider and unofficial (*minjian* 民间) as it gets, not unlike Yu. Their conservative reaction to the newcomer (Yu in Shen's case, Fan in Yu's) is a clear picture of how position-holding dynamics tend to reproduce almost naturally in the field. Even more ironically, both Yu and Fan responded to their belittlers with sharp critiques. “And I will carry on, [/] I can't help believing although I'm just a shrew / I'm still stronger than those hypocrite strongmen” (并且, 还将继续下去[/]我不得不相信: 哪怕做一个泼妇/也比那些虚伪的人强), wrote Yu in her “Qing yuanliang, wo hai zai xie shi” 请原谅, 我还在写诗 (Pardon Me, Please, I'm Carrying On Writing Poetry),<sup>39</sup> not less stinging than Fan, as will be discussed below.

To add one more bit of irony to a situation which was already quite odd, it was Wang Jiaxin 王家新 who came out to Fan's defence. The irony here lies in the fact that Wang is associated with a brand of poetry way more intellectual and elite than Shen, respectively identified by van Crevel as the “Elevated” and the “Earthly” (see the Introduction). This is one more demonstration that they are not watertight categories, Wang Jiaxin himself being singled out by van Crevel as an “artistically sophisticated exampl[e] of Elevated social concern,”<sup>40</sup> and he confirmed this attribute in the article he wrote for the August 2017 issue of *Wenxue jiaoyu* 文学教育 (*Literary Education*),

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<sup>37</sup> Shen Haobo, “Shen Haobo: tantan Yu Xiuhua.” The polemics is discussed by Nunes, “Sitting With Discomfort.”

<sup>38</sup> Van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry*, 307.

<sup>39</sup> Yu Xiuhua, *Yueguang*, 137.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 341.

significantly titled “Fan Yusu yu wenxuexing” 范雨素与文学性 (Fan Yusu and Literary Value), to address what he termed “some chronic ills of the cultural sphere” (文化界的一些痼疾).<sup>41</sup> The article is poignant precisely because it addresses the heart of the problem, i.e. aesthetic ideology.

Wang begins his discussion by stingingly pointing out the contradiction in Yu Xiuhua’s reaction, making no mystery of his own surprise at it, and reminding her of the similar treatment reserved for her. He adopts a strong populist, anti-elitist stance in an apparent attempt to tear down the gates of recognition and the pillars of symbolic power that be: “I am inclined to trust ordinary readers, because they count on their instinct and intuition: What’s good’s good, what’s moving’s moving” (我宁愿相信普通读者，普通读者靠的是他们的本能和直觉，好就好，感动就感动).<sup>42</sup> The approach can also be seen oscillating towards paternalism: It has a high-brow intellectual who bows to the genuinely untamed emotions of the masses, and overly essentialises Yu and Fan in terms of vulnerability and “helplessness” (无招架之功). However, the stress on (ordinary) readers’ response encapsulates a view that excludes technique and formal craft as the only or main criteria to assert the literary value of a work. The ability to stir readers’ emotions is put forward as a valid consideration for “literariness”, less measurable but arguably even more profound:

除了灵魂的追问、精神的拓展和提升等等，“文学性”也是有着它的底线或“道德的最低限度”（阿多诺）的，这个“最低限度”即对人的尊重，对生命的理解、同情和尊重——尤其是对那些“被侮辱与被损害的”生灵。

Other than soul search, spiritual enrichment and uplifting, etc., “literary value” has also its own base threshold, its “*minima moralia*” (Adorno), and this “*minima*” consists in respect towards people and

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<sup>41</sup> Wang Jiabin, “Fan Yusu,” 5.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 4.

understanding of, empathy and respect for life—especially for those “who have been humiliated and harmed”.<sup>43</sup>

Morality and emotive response are therefore categories that contribute in determining what can be considered literary. It is interesting that Wang subtly opposes aspects that can be summarised as “Elevated” or “intellectual,” such as soul search and spiritual cultivation (I wish to stress *summarised* because by no means I am implying that such elements are alien to grassroots productions), to literature’s “Earthly” threshold—its bottom line, its fundamental basis, its origin and source. In a way, it connects to the assumptions of Fan (and other grassroots writers as well) as being expressions of authenticity, allowing literature to return to its roots, a return which implies that it has gone astray in the hands of high-brow intellectuals (the “return-to-the-roots” peculiarity of workers’ poetry already surfaced in the commentary discussed in chapter Two). Emotions then are not only a category for the readers’ response, but also for the writer herself. Empathy (*tongqing xin* 同情心), also criticised by Yu, is defended by Wang as “the source of [the writer’s or poet’s] ‘literary value’” (“文学性”的本源所在), allowing her to “jump out of the self” (跳出自我) into a wider world. According to him, Fan achieves this in the parts dedicated to her mother and to migrant children.

Wang also observes that, anyway, Fan is at the beginning of her career. Any judgment on the quality of her literary work will have to wait longer and more substantial source material (he apparently ignores Fan’s other works of poetry and nonfiction, or thinks that their number is still too low to contradict this statement). For now, Fan has shown “a straightforward, wild, hearsay popular flavour” (质直的、野生的、道听途说的民间味道), and what her “plain and unadorned letters” (朴拙的文字)—and straightforwardness, “wildness,” plain and unadorned language are all elements pertaining to the aesthetic—have been able to convey “what is if not the most precious and

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.



most missing thing in our society?!” (难道不正是我们这个社会最珍贵、也最缺乏的东西?!).<sup>44</sup>

While this conclusion is not so different from that reached by other commentators as outlined above, Wang is right on point in bringing the discussion to the higher grounds of hegemonic aesthetics. Aesthetic ideology, although missing in virtually every other discussion on Fan other than Wang’s article, is the elephant in the room. The whole polemics around the “quality” of “Wo shi Fan Yusu” is motivated precisely by the challenge this memoir moves to hegemonic aesthetics, whether that challenge is viewed favourably or considered undesirable, if not outrageous.

The picture would not be complete without an authoritative piece published on 2 May 2017 by Qin Xiaoyu, the editor of the *Wo de shipian* workers’ poetry anthology (see chapter One), titled “Ye tan Fan Yusu” 也谈范雨素 (Also on Fan Yusu). Qin’s article was prompted by Weibo influencer He Caitou’s 和菜头 statement, on 27 April, questioning the value of “Wo shi Fan Yusu” in “moving” people, and, in particular, taking odds with the passage where Fan ironically criticises the habits of the city’s *nouveau riche*, because, in his opinion, being an ordinary person gives her no right to smear socialist New China. Moreover, “If you were an employer, how would feel reading this passage?” (如果你是雇主，你看到这样的句子会有什么感受).<sup>45</sup> Qin rebukes this stance, stressing that the reason why many readers could be moved by Fan’s memoir is precisely that she exposed realities that many ordinary people experience directly in their lives.

Qin, quickly done with He, grabs the opportunity to provide a more lengthy discussion of Fan’s work. To date, his is one of the few pieces that take Fan more seriously from a literary point of view. For although Qin concludes that the value of “Wo shi Fan Yusu” lies not in its “literariness,” but in its extraordinary testimony of new social inequalities and the reality of migrant

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> He Caitou, “Yi bang nuli de pigu.” The page also sarcastically includes the annoyed response by Ye San 叶三, the editor-in-chief of *Zhengwu*, who briefly but efficiently commented: “He Caitou is truly a colossal moron” (和菜头真是个大傻逼).

workers, he is also willing to discuss it in fully literary terms. He compares Fan to “a vagrant intellectual in traditional China” (传统中国的游民知识分子), and, while sharing the assumption that her writing is a “retur[n] to the most primary and most precious meaning of literature and arts” (回到了文学艺术最原始最珍贵的意义), he also calls it—based on Fan’s own words—as magical reportage (*mohuan jishi* 魔幻纪实). The main difference from magical realism (*mohuan xianshi* 魔幻现实), according to Qin, lies in magical reportage being real lived experience, told through a perspective that allows the storyteller to become simultaneously the spectator and reporter of her own story. The “magical” side of it is realised through the use of techniques that Qin associates with absurdist fiction, such as the break from regulated time and linear (or logical) plot construction, the stream of consciousness, and the use of subtle humour to write about “seriously tragical subjects” (严肃的悲剧主题).<sup>46</sup> This reference to absurdism is curious. As a matter of fact, such literary devices are not exclusive to absurdism, and above all, Fan’s work can hardly be considered absurdist. The tones of absurdity in her memoir, like the depiction of the *nouveau riche*’s lifestyle, seem more like colourful expressions of reality to produce a sense of estrangement in the reader, than parts of a careful strategy to push reality itself beyond its margins. For sure, the reference to absurdist fiction highlights the fact that we are dealing with proper literary devices here, rather than just a dull account of pure facts.

In fact, Fan herself was understandably uncompromising in the defence of her cultural capital and in demanding proper recognition of her authorship. At the same time, however, she has refused the title of “writer,” understood as an “official” category ascribable to upper-class requirements, or a full-time job that loses its quintessential noble character. Fan has constantly repeated that her desire to write something that she also considers meaningful keeps her necessarily outside circuits of “on-demand” (commodified) or full-time writing. In an interview that came out in January 2018

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<sup>46</sup> Qin Xiaoyu, “Ye tan Fan Yusu.”

with the title “Wo hai shi Fan Yusu” 我还是范雨素 (I Am Still Fan Yusu), she was adamant: “I am no writer” (我可不是什么作家). She continues by making explicit her refusal towards a market consumption of herself:

还有个活动，他们只要我去坐在那儿，什么也不用干，就给我一万。我一口回绝了。你如果要帮我，就直接把钱打给我得了。或者让我干活，让我演讲，让我劳动，也行。可是什么都不用干就给钱，我不去。这是在消费我。

There was this event, where they only wanted me to go and sit. I wasn't supposed to do anything else, and they would have paid me one thousand. I refused immediately. If you want to help me, then just give me the money and be done with it, or give me a job, let me give a speech, let me work, all are fine. I just won't go if you want to pay me to sit there and do nothing. This is consuming me [like a commodity].<sup>47</sup>

The ostensible refusal of taking on the writer's identity is therefore a performative refusal of fetishisation and exoticisation, precisely because Fan wants to be appreciated for the content of her writing, not out of being identified as a representative “grassroots author.” Paradoxically, this refusal is constitutive of Fan's peculiar identity as an author, but for this reason it is also ambiguous. In other instances, Fan has described herself as a woman writer (rather than a worker writer) and acknowledged that her writing can be a form of spiritual strength to help workers expand their perspectives.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, she has reiterated that remaining a non-specialist writer allows her to preserve creative independence, but also to keep in touch with the reality of labour (a statement which connects her directly with the debates on the relationship between intellectuals and the

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<sup>47</sup> Fan Yusu, “Wo hai shi Fan Yusu.”

<sup>48</sup> Talk with Fan Yusu at the Global Migrant Festival 2020, Singapore, 22 November 2020.

working class discussed in chapters One and Two).<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, the boundaries of the grassroots are not inviolable for her. In spring 2019, for example, upon Shi Libin's recommendation, she was among a selected group of PLC members, together with Xiao hai and Wan Huashan, who took part in the intensive writing course hosted by the Beijing Lao She Institute of Literature. Furthermore, Fan has accepted a number of awards given by prestigious institutions, even outside China, like the 2017 "Women's Media Award" sponsored by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.<sup>50</sup>

Under these circumstances, Fan displays a conception of literature (and writing) that is intimately related to her social condition. In our interview, she lucidly illustrated the conditions of "northern floaters" for whom "it is too difficult to plant roots in a city like this, like Beijing" (要想在北京这样的城里扎根太难了), particularly as the high prices of rents that make them unaffordable for migrant workers. She continued by arguing that a life like hers deprives the individual of "desires" (欲望). "I have become exactly like that," she argues, "I have smashed the cracked pot" (我已经混成这样, 我就破罐子破摔了)—meaning she abandoned herself to desperation in a dire situation.<sup>51</sup> This sense of resignation is not uncommon among PLC members, and can be interpreted as a reaction to the overall social situation, but at the same time is problematic, because writing itself is a reaction to immobility, a form of agency. However, workers' writing today is not framed within emancipatory politics but mostly individualised as personal comfort, and Fan does not believe in the possibility for literary activity to fundamentally change her own life, let alone the condition of migrant workers:

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>50</sup> Gu Wenting and Wang Yuran, "Nüpaiduizhang."

<sup>51</sup> Interview on 2 November 2019.

在文学中奋斗，但我不喜欢用尽浑身的力气来写东西。我写的东西就是一个是我愿意写，第二个就是人家说的写东西很轻盈。我愿意写的时候才写，没目的。[...] 那时候我出名都是撞的。[...] 这个中国呀，如果你不是那种进入体制内的人，你靠写字根本不可能吃饭，都会饿死的，所以大家都特别清醒。那些年龄大的人来听课的都很清醒。人家都在打工，没有一个人闲着的。你那有几个一块做家政的，都在打工。因为靠着文字都不行。

I struggle in literature, but I don't like exhausting my energies up to write. I write, first, what I want to write, and second, in a relaxed way, like people say [it should be]. I write when I feel like it, I have no other goal. [...] My becoming famous was [therefore] very unexpected. [...] In China, if you're not someone who's entered the system, you essentially can't get a living from what you write. No, you'll starve to death, and that's why folks [in the PLC] are all very clear about that. Those youngsters who come to listen to the lectures are all very clear about that. We are all working hard, no one's just having a relaxed time. There's a bunch doing housework, and all are busy working, because it's impossible to survive only on writing.<sup>52</sup>

This seems to be Fan's standpoint on the discussion about the actual possibility for individual writers to emancipate themselves from adverse social conditions through their art. Of course, Fan's is first of all an open refusal to write on demand, despite the fact that this could probably alleviate her financial burden. Such angst, however, is also a marker of identity, because it stems from a refusal to surrender her principles and reduce literature to a vile commodity. At the same time, it is a social indictment, since, contrary to some avant-garde writers who can at least count on limited forms of recognition (and, at times, sources of income), most worker writers are still "busy *dagong-ing*."

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

In sum, the widespread interest and heated debates generated by “Wo shi Fan Yusu” cannot simply be explained by the virality of the piece. Wang Jiaxin and Qin Xiaoyu’s articles show with the highest lucidity that the kernel lies in the challenge posed by Fan to the premises of commonly-held, hegemonic literary norms precisely by putting together a strong social commentary that benefits from real-life experience *and* strategies and techniques that would be commonly considered typical expression of “literature.” Catching the conscious and unconscious connections made by the author is another piece that needs to be added to the puzzle, in order to address a problem well elucidated by van Crevel: do we read texts by subaltern authors because they come from down below the thresholds of visibility and reveal the secrets that hide in the bottoms of society, away from the gaze of the upper classes, regardless of the actual content of these texts, or because they are meaningful on their own?<sup>53</sup>

### 4.3. A book of fate: textual analysis

#### 4.3.1. *Fan Yusu and literature*

Considerations on aesthetics and personal motivations serve as essential guidelines for a closer and more thorough analysis of Fan’s text(s). Before diving into the text, it must be observed that “Wo shi Fan Yusu” belongs to the realm of literary nonfiction. The name implies that such a text, although not fictional, makes use of devices proper of literary creation (plot construction, characterisations, uses of time, etc.) to produce the story it wants to convey. Nonfiction, known in Chinese as *feixugou* 非虚构, has become extremely popular as a genre in China since the late 2000s. Although already highly visible in a number of literary journals towards the end of the decade, its definitive baptism came with a debate hosted by *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 (*People’s Literature*) in

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<sup>53</sup> Van Crevel, “Misfit.”

2010, when the authoritative journal also inaugurated a dedicated column on nonfiction. The “Chinese” understanding of nonfiction largely includes autobiographies, memoirs, pieces of investigation, reportage, and “historical prose” (*lishi sanwen* 历史散文).<sup>54</sup> According to Li Yunlei, the appearance and popularity of *feixugou* entails enormous questions about the deeper nature of literature, literary theory and expansion of the range of what is properly considered authorial authorship, after decades of emphasis on form over content and of divorce between literature and social problems:

“非虚构”的出现，不仅是对文学的反思，同时也是进入“世界”的努力。我们置身其中的这个世界，并不是不言自明的，要了解这个世界，不仅需要知识的丰富积累，而且需要个人的亲身体验。

The appearance of nonfiction is not only a renewed reflection on literature, but also an active effort to enter the “world”. The world we all live in is not self-explanatory. In order to understand this world, we must not only accumulate a rich amount of knowledge, but also need direct experience.<sup>55</sup>

Although Li admits that “we can only spot some seeds of this new aesthetic” (我们还只能看到这一新美学的萌芽),<sup>56</sup> the element of the author’s individual experience as carrier of truth, or, at least, reliability, is indeed a constitutive element of an aesthetic standpoint (just like, by contrast, that of the author’s emotional detachment in other contexts). Workers’ literature fits perfectly. Liu Dongwu insists that the strength of worker authors comes precisely from their ability to convey stories and emotions that they have truly experienced, “enough to mute and eclipse all narrative

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<sup>54</sup> Li Yunlei, *Xin shiji “diceng wenxue,”* 206–207.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, 204.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, 213.

technique” (足以令一切叙事技巧默然失色),<sup>57</sup> thus implying that this truthfulness built on personal embodied experience should overcome considerations of formal matter. In a way, it is also a further development of the discourse on “penetrating life,” *shenru shenghuo* 深入生活, already present in the more socially-committed tendencies of May Fourth, as well as paradigmatically in Mao’s *Yan’an Talks*. Clearly then, it is a challenge to the conceptual boundaries of literature, but also a provocation to hugely expand its practical possibilities.

The memoir is precisely a form of nonfiction, as well as an autobiography. Without getting lost in the postmodernist argument that the recollection of the past is necessarily biofictional, since the nonfictional does not really exist and “fact is fiction,”<sup>58</sup> the memoir nevertheless does include, as put forward by Eakin, “an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation,”<sup>59</sup> a reorganisation of episodes, elements, experiences of the narrator’s past. It is precisely in this latter aspect that the most literary side of it becomes manifest. Moreover, the memoir, arguably (but not necessarily) shorter in length and scope than autobiography-proper, tends to demand identification from the reader, with whom the memoirist also identifies in turn by presenting her or his past from a spectator’s position.<sup>60</sup> It therefore entails an extremely complex relationship between the supposed truthfulness of the autobiographical account—what is narrated is true, it has really happened like it is now told—and the *way* the narration is undertaken, which may be heavily influenced by the message the author wishes to convey (which is also a relationship between mimesis and diegesis).

It is therefore worthy to return to the *incipit* of “Wo shi Fan Yusu,” because it condenses in one line some of the most basic elements that will constitute the following analysis: “My life is a book too hard to read, so clumsily has fate bound me.” I will divide the discussion according to the

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<sup>57</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Zhengti*, 83.

<sup>58</sup> Lackey, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>59</sup> Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Avižienis, “Mediated and Unmediated.”



two figures contained in the two propositions. The first figure is that of the book. A metonymic signifier for literature, the book evidently recurs in the second proposition through the metaphor of clumsy binding (*zhuangding* 装订 refers specifically to bookbinding). The opening is skilfully crafted, for it simultaneously confers to the story a marked literary flavour, and conveys Fan's love for literature, which also implies her willingness to produce not just an account of her life and hardships, but rather something with fully literary dignity (the book metaphor recurs also elsewhere in Fan's production).

This aspect allows and calls for an exploration of Fan's personal understanding of literature. As opposed to both the politically-framed proletarian literature(s) of 1930s–1970s, Fan, as already mentioned above, does not view writing as a social endeavour, but more in terms of personal cultivation, solace, advancement (similarly to other worker writers). Borges, Calvino and Kafka are among writers she admires the most:

[卡尔维诺]能当老师了，老师肯定是超前的。我觉得我为什么喜欢看？我对时空感兴趣。宇宙奇趣嘛，我不跟你说嘛，我看了博尔赫斯，我为啥醉了卡尔维诺了，是从那个小径分叉的花园，博尔赫斯《小径分叉的花园》里注意到卡尔维诺的。我每天都在想时空[。]看着看着，就因为看时空的原因嘛，我就喜欢博尔赫斯，然后喜欢卡尔维诺了。我觉得他们两个像。[...]但是卡不卡不能跟他们比。卡夫卡那个写的多容易，就是说变形计嘛人变成了虫了嘛，可不能就说整个人类的现实困境。但是你看博尔赫斯跟卡尔维诺都好像站在宇宙中心写的。

If [Calvino] could become a master, that's precisely because he was ahead of everyone else. Why do I like him? I think it's because of my interest in space and time. The universe is so fascinating! I already told you that I've read Borges. How come that I've fallen for Calvino? I could find him in Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*. I think of space and time all the time[.] Since I wanted to read something that dealt with space and time, I started liking Borges, and then I started liking Calvino, too. [...] But

we can't compare them with Kafka. He didn't play fair. He wrote of a man who transforms into an insect, but that's not a hardship of real life anyone can identify with. When you read Borges and Calvino, you really get the impression they wrote from the centre of the universe.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, I could not help but wondering whether Fan included Calvino in her list because she was talking with an Italian person, or if he was already in her mind. However, not only is Calvino extremely appreciated among cultivated readers in China,<sup>62</sup> but he also fits perfectly in this frame, thus making her claim absolutely plausible. And while her understanding of Kafka may be problematic and partly self-contradictory (she later rushed to clarify that she did not mean to say Kafka was a bad writer), her choice is motivated by these writers having successfully addressed the human condition, and apparently also by an interest in authors concerned with plot and formal constructions beyond the immediate boundaries of realism (this is left unsaid, but heavily suggested by Fan's words). When further interrogated about her favourite Chinese writers, she mentioned Liu Zhenyun 刘震云 and Yan Ge 颜歌, but repeated the name of Han Shaogong 韩少功 more than once. She said she liked him for “smear[ing] intellectuals, and no one dared to respond (骂知识分子, 没有一个人敢回嘴的).<sup>63</sup> It is indeed possible to find several points of connection between Han Shaogong and Fan. Particularly with his masterpiece *Maqiao cidian* (*A Dictionary of Maqiao*), Han juxtaposed a rigorously ethnographic portrayal of marginal rural areas with more general reflections on existence that can hardly be considered realism in the strict sense.

What is absent here is any active identification with migrant workers' or “subaltern” literatures. In fact, Fan rarely identifies as a worker writer. While never refusing the term *dagong*, she nevertheless insisted, during our interview, on the “prejudice” (歧视) embedded in the term.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview on 2 November 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Brezzi, “La ricezione di Calvino”; Pesaro, “L’Italo Calvino di Can Xue.”

<sup>63</sup> Interview on 2 November 2019.

Conversely, while she feels comfortable with the term *new worker*, she is adamant that no one uses it outside Picun (although of course things have considerably changed since our 2019 interview).<sup>64</sup> The term she used most frequently during the interview, and that she considered as the quintessence of literature from her point of view, was “purity” (*chunjie* 纯洁). What this term immediately evokes is “pure literature,” i.e. the brand of literature more concerned with abstract themes over social matters. There are indeed several elements in “Wo shi Fan Yusu” more assimilable to “pure” literature than to the “subaltern,” like some modernist undertones centred around a passage from the memoir which reads: “Art originates from life, and life today is absurd” (艺术源于生活，当下的生活都是荒诞)<sup>65</sup>—one may complete the syllogism by adding that art (and literature) must thus be absurd as well, and being a writer in the present day determines a condition of absurdity. Such a standpoint is extremely challenging at least for three reasons: first, it makes Fan’s position in a dichotomic framework of “pure” versus “subaltern” increasingly problematic; second, it shows how complex and diversified the aesthetics employed by worker writers is; third, it complicates the position of those who asserted Fan’s insufficient literariness.

#### 4.3.2. *The figure of fate*

Then the *incipit* introduces the figure of fate (*mingyun* 命运). Fate is presented as the root of her life’s hardships and misfortunes, or, as the metaphor goes, for binding the book of her existence in a clumsy way. Fate tends to appear often in migrant workers’ literature, evoked as the force responsible for what authors have gone through. In connection with this, Pozzana has applied the term “rational fatalism” to denote “a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of subjective existence,” which carries the risk of “succumbing to the ‘hope’ of recognition from the society

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<sup>64</sup> Interview on 2 November 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Fan Yusu, “Wo shi Fan Yusu.”

which [migrant worker authors] ostensibly reject”.<sup>66</sup> Essentially, its connotations are socio-political rather than rhetorical and narrative: fate, as a supernatural entity, cloaks the constituents that determine the worker’s social condition, and therefore reveals not so much a neglect of material inequality, but an omission of its structural causes.

A pertinent appearance of fate in philosophical tradition is to be found in the classic text *Zhuangzi* 莊子, later considered one of the founding texts of Daoism. Fate, or *ming* 命, variously translated according to languages and editions (destiny, [Heavenly] mandate, and so on), materialises in several instances throughout the text. One specific occurrence is of particular interest, because it directly involves an element of social imbalance. The following words are spoken by a man, Zisang 子桑, who lives in poverty, and is wondering about who or what force is responsible for his misfortune:

吾思乎使我至此極者而弗得也。父母豈欲吾貧哉？天無私覆，地無私載，天地豈私貧我哉？求其為之者而不得也。然而至此極者，命也夫！

I was pondering what it is that has brought me to this extremity, but I couldn’t find the answer. My father and mother surely wouldn’t wish this poverty on me. Heaven covers all without partiality; earth bears up all without partiality – heaven and earth surely wouldn’t single me out to make me poor. I try to discover who is doing it, but I can’t get the answer. Still, here I am – at the very extreme. It must be fate.<sup>67</sup>

The passage is extracted from the sixth chapter of the book, “Da zong shi” 大宗師 (The Great and Venerable Teacher), which is part of the first seven chapters, or the Inner Chapters (*neipian* 內

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<sup>66</sup> Pozzana, “Poetry,” 194.

<sup>67</sup> Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 54.

篇). The understanding of fate here is extremely close to Fan's interpretation. In both cases, fate is imagined as the root cause for the subject's troubles, and the *Zhuangzi* is even more unambiguous in absolving any other temporal or spiritual force from responsibility. In a previous chapter, "Renjianshi" 人間世 (In the World of Men), fate is even presented as a crucial element of the world: "In the world, there are two great decrees: one is fate and the other is duty" (天下有大戒二：其一，命也；其一，義也).<sup>68</sup> However, fate's imbrication with social organisation is made explicit immediately thereafter: "it is fate that a son should love his parents" (子之愛親，命也).<sup>69</sup> It makes sense, therefore, to interpret fate as a sort of "post-hoc rational rationalisation,"<sup>70</sup> to borrow Harrell's words, or a pragmatic accommodation of life's vicissitudes in Sangren's analysis.<sup>71</sup> Fate then turns into an instrument of social harmony, inspiring individuals to accept misfortune as an element in the ever-rotating duality with fortune, thus restoring cosmic—and social—balance.

The word *mingyun* recurs only three times in "Wo shi Fan Yusu." Its inclusion in the *incipit* and the unequivocal representation of it as the agent behind the whole story, however, make it programmatic and impress its presence throughout the entire memoir. Moreover, the other two occurrences are likewise located at key points of the narrative. In one case, fate grabs the grim destiny of his brother, who has given up his dream of becoming a writer: "My brother now does only farming, and spends his days breaking his back. He no longer asks why, nor laments the miseries of his fate" (大哥哥现在只种地了，过着苦巴巴的日子。再也不搔首问天，感叹命运多舛).<sup>72</sup> In the other, it thematises the situation of migrant children without guardianship or access to educational facilities: "My eldest daughter's two friends are exactly like that. Their fate is

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>70</sup> Harrell, "The Concept of Fate," 101.

<sup>71</sup> Sangren, "Fate, Agency, and the Economy of Desire," 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Fan Yusu, "Wo shi Fan Yusu," 10.

basically a most tragic one” (我的大女儿交的两个朋友，都是这样的孩子。他们的命运基本上也是最惨的).<sup>73</sup> In both these occurrences, fate fully displays its double meaning as fatalism in the face of a dismal but inescapable future, and as a consequence of the social conditions making it so. The same goes for a final appearance of fate as Fan ponders on the operation of land grab on the part of the state to make room for a high-speed train station against which her mother and other farmers stand up, described towards the end of the memoir (the word used here being not *mingyun* but a resigned *renming* 认命):

一亩地，二万二就全部买断。人均地本来就很少，少数不会打工的人，怎么活下去？没有当权者愿意想这些，没有人愿意想灵魂。神州大地的每个旮旯晃晃都是这样，都认命了。

One *mu* of land was sold out for just 22,000 yuan. Per capita is already very little, but what about those few people who are no longer able to work? How are they going to carry on? No authorities are willing to care after them, no one thinks of their souls. In every corner of the Great Land [of China] it's like that for everyone. They have all resigned themselves to their fate.<sup>74</sup>

But there are also other passages that seem to run counter to the ostensible omnipotence of fate. Fan describes her decision to leave the countryside and undertake migration to Beijing in terms of subjective agency: “I could not stand those dry days spent like the frog looking at the sky from the bottom of the well. So I came to Beijing. I wanted to see the world.” Mobility is therefore portrayed as a form of self-determination, the only way to escape the dullness of a lifetime at home (basically, her brother's destiny). Language itself is used to emotionally sustain this position, through phrases like “I could not stand” and “I wanted to” and the metaphor of the frog on the

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

bottom of the well, not to mention the words “Walk barefoot to the end of the world” (赤脚走天涯) used to poetically describe Fan’s first outbound journey.

This declaration of agency stands in apparent contrast with the determinism of fate. Migration here appears more as a materialisation of self-ownership, a concept widely discussed by Sabina Knight as part of her more general survey on moral agency in Chinese literature.<sup>75</sup> According to Knight, self-ownership means the possibility to exert individual agency through moral action for the post-socialist self in China. In fact, self-ownership, as a specific mode of agency, is closely connected with the return of capitalism in China, since this stress on individuality and on the possibility to dispose of one’s personal “capital” (including body and workforce) should not be separated from its market value, based on individual competition. Knight acutely observes that in “modern fiction, representing concrete means by which economic power is deployed,”<sup>76</sup> reveals that self-ownership is never enacted unproblematically, but it is always entangled in a complex, and often contradictory, relationship with the imperatives of social order. This is precisely the kind of agency that Rong Cai considers impaired in the fictional representation of the traveller in post-socialist China, whose action is constantly challenged by the codes and violence of the exterior reality, testifying to “the inability of the self to exercise its active agency for survival in the age of reforms.”<sup>77</sup> Discussing Xu Zechen’s “migrant-worker” fiction, where the (male) migrant is also presented as a heroic adventurer out into the (urban) world, Pamela Hunt disagrees with Cai and observes that “Travel, in the adventure and transgression it allows for, is a form of agency in and of itself, [;] it also leads to a moral agency that appears as travellers chose to act according to their own sense of compassion, loyalty and social responsibility.”<sup>78</sup> The latter approach, escaping both vulgar

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<sup>75</sup> Knight, *The Heart of Time*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, 227.

<sup>77</sup> Rong Cai, *The Subject in Crisis*, 133.

<sup>78</sup> Hunt, “Drifting Through the Capital,” 28.

determinism and illusions about the agent's unrestrained autonomy, seems fitting for Fan as well, provided that social structures are firmly kept in the picture. Agency is certainly at play there, but its limitations are also in plain sight.

Although the three scholars mentioned above were all working with fiction, the problems elucidated by them find further inquiry in Fan's nonfictional account, which constitutes a further proof of the literary validity of her production through (probably) unconscious intertextual dialogue. Fatal and agentic elements tend to intermingle in "Wo shi Fan Yusu," concurring as constitutive elements of Fan's self-(re)discovery through writing. The use of the book metaphor and the figure of fate to express these meanings are clearly attempts by Fan to build a literary narrative rather than just an account of raw facts. As metaphor, they offer a subjective thematisation of the socio-economic conditions of Fan's life, and at the same time interact and resonate with multiple traditions (classical thought, contemporary fiction)

#### 4.3.3. *Save the children*

Under the yoke of fatal/social determination, children are the third central element of "Wo shi Fan Yusu," after the mother and fate. Their representation also lends itself to intertextual—that is, fully literary—considerations, thus contributing to our discussion on the aesthetics employed by Fan. Migrant children are presented through two friends of Fan's daughters'. One, Ding Jianping 丁建平, "doesn't go to school because her mother left her father, who was then very angry[.] The only opportunity would be schools for migrants, but they change several teachers in one term, and quality is not good. Anyway, you can't become a thing there, better to save some money" (丁建平不上学是因为妈妈抛弃了爸爸, 爸爸生气。爸爸还说, 公立学校不让农民工的孩子上, 上学只能到打工学校上, 这样的学校一学期换好几个老师, 教学质量差。反正上不成个器, 就省点钱不上). The other one, Li Jingni 李京妮, was abandoned by her mother after she discovered she



had been cheated by Jingni's father, who had a wife back home: According to the father, there was no need (没必要) for "an illegal child with no household registration" (户口也没有的黑孩子) to also "attend an illegal school, to be illegal twice" (再上这黑学籍的学校, 来个双料黑). Fan's bitter conclusion is that "In urban villages like [Picun], in Beijing, there's a lot of such motherless migrant children" (在北京这样的城中村里, 这样没妈的农民工的孩子也很多).<sup>79</sup>

Attention to children oscillates between ethnographic concern and narrative representation of their condition. We have already seen, just above, how fate is perceived as playing a role in their lives, turning them tragic, because migrants' children are generally abandoned or neglected by their parents, and have little access to education in the city (floating children) or back home (left-behind), often of poor quality (naturally, this further bespeaks of fate as a metaphoric substitution for social relations). Education—also parental—is presented as the most essential factor securing children's future. The emphasis on their mothers' absence stands in contrast with Fan's importance attributed to her own mother's role and to her "matrilineal" line of solidarity: Her mother towards her, herself towards her daughters, to "return motherly love". Fan's conclusion is that such marginalisation is at the roots of children's eventual degradation to mere workforce:

因为没有亲人为他们求告老天爷, 他们都变成了世界工厂的螺丝钉, 流水线上的兵马俑, 过着提线木偶一样的生活。

As no dear one would pray the Heavens for them, they have become screws in the workshop of the world, terracotta warriors of the assembly line, living a marionette's life.

The image of the screw is all but unique in worker literature, and actually it is perhaps the most evident aspect of the tremendous shift in workers' imagination of their position in labour

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*, 11.

relations following the beginning of the Reform and Opening Up policy. Being screws of the factory was marked by a positive connotation during the Mao era (1950s–1970s), symbolising the worker’s identification with the socialist industry, and their pride in being a tiny but participative cog in the machine. After market reforms, and especially within post-1980s migrant workers’ literature, the screw turned into a symbol for exploitation, anomie, human disposability and disidentification with the factory, and, simultaneously, the genre’s most widespread trope. The metaphor of the terracotta warriors of the assembly line, by contrast, is not as common, but it appears in one of Xu Lizhi’s most cited poems, “Liushuixian de bingmayong” 流水线的兵马俑 (Terracotta Warriors of the Assembly Line), where the barrack-like atmosphere of the factory is powerfully conveyed:

沿线站着

夏丘

张子凤

肖朋

李孝定

唐秀猛

雷兰娇

许立志

朱正武

潘霞

苒雪梅

这些不分昼夜的打工者

穿戴好

静电衣

静电帽

静电鞋

静电手套

静电环

整装待发

静候军令

只一响铃功夫

悉数回到秦朝

Along the line stand

Xia Qiu

Zhang Zifeng

Xiao Peng

Li Xiaoding

Tang Xiumeng

Lei Lanjiao

Xu Lizhi

Zhu Zhengwu

Pan Xia

Ran Xuemei

these workers who can't tell night from day

wearing

electrostatic clothes

electrostatic hats

electrostatic shoes

electrostatic gloves

electrostatic bracelets  
all at the ready  
silently awaiting their orders  
when the bell rings  
they're sent back to the Qin<sup>80</sup>

Whereas active intertextual citation is not as common as one might imagine among migrant-workers writers and poets, here the reference is clear. Fan herself learned about Xu and read his poems in the activities of the PLC, which, as already mentioned, was established just a few weeks before the poet's suicide. This citation, then, appears as a form of identification with the vast social cohort of migrant workers, as well as with the scene of their literary production and representation. While most of the critical commentary and this chapter as well have strongly focused on the individuality of Fan's work with respect to its typicality, this example adds more elements to the picture.

Fan's strong attention to children's social plight, their education and their prospects also situates her in a rich tradition stemming from early-20th-century fiction in China which similarly employs the figure of children as a metaphor for larger questions of political or historical nature. Education generally plays a central role in this tradition, because it represents the instrument through which children can potentially be kept within the constraints and oppression of dominant culture. It is impossible not to evoke Lu Xun once again here. It is well known that, in his "Kuangren riji" 狂人日记 (A Madman's Diary), penned in 1918, Lu Xun described Chinese society imbued with Confucian morality as cannibalistic, for it produced a repressive mentality that suffocated its people's freedom and aspiration for the new. But the real problem is that all are human-eaters themselves, suggesting that every person has been tainted by this reactionary ideology.

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<sup>80</sup> Xu Lizhi, *Xin de yi tian*, 198–199.

The madman is the only one who can see things through, and his ostensible madness is actually clarity and clairvoyance. As the “cannibals” are closing upon him, the madman entrusts his last hope on children who have not already eaten others, or that have not been exposed to the “old” culture yet: “Perhaps there are still children who haven’t eaten people. Save the children...” (沒有喫過人的孩子，或者還有？救救孩子……). If there is hope, then, it is in a different culture for new generations, i.e. a different education.

Children have been associated with the pernicious influence of negative aspects of culture (particularly expressed through education) also in literature from later periods, particularly after the late 1970s. Ah Cheng 阿城 (b. 1949) seems to pick up Lu Xun’s thread in his “Haizi wang” 孩子王 (King of Children) of 1984. A Root-seeking masterpiece, it focuses on the relationship between a sent-down youth who teaches at an elementary school in a remote rural village during the Cultural Revolution and his young students. In this relationship, the roles of teacher and learner are rearticulated, as both set a new start through the shared rediscovery of a dictionary, against the backdrop of a cultural *tabula rasa* sustained by the village’s position seemingly outside time and space. Despite the absence of any outcry to save the children here, a silent call to save oneself through a novel cultural childhood pervades the story. More than fifteen years later, Meng Lang 孟浪 similarly entrusted children with defiance against established culture: “oh, the teachers are coming— / a child in heaven pushes hard against eternity with his hands: / one mistaken word” (哦，教員們在降臨——/一個孩子在天上用雙手緊緊按住永恒： /一個錯誤的詞).<sup>81</sup> Absent in these two instances, if not on a very metaphoric plane, cannibalism makes a comeback in *Jiuguo* 酒国 (*The Republic of Wine*), a 1992 novel by Mo Yan 莫言, where children are regularly cooked and eaten by a group of corrupt bureaucrats and businessmen in a delirious heterotopia of excess. David Der-Wei Wang rightly observes that Lu Xun’s “Save the children” is completely reversed here in a

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<sup>81</sup> Meng Lang, *Sull’educazione*, 76.

call to “consume the children,”<sup>82</sup> and indeed the novel bespeaks more of unbridled consumerism following market reforms, but this comeback of cannibalism is nevertheless strongly Lu Xun-ian. Finally, moving from literature to the vaster realm of cultural production, the call is echoed but reversed again in “Bu yao zuo Zhongguoren de haizi” 不要做中国人的孩子 (Don’t Be Children of the Chinese), a song by Zhou Yunpeng 周云蓬 to commemorate those who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (where being children was also dangerous in itself, given the collapse of teaching buildings), which also contains a line clearly inspired from “A Madman’s Diary”: “Don’t be children of the Chinese, if you’re starving they’ll eat you instead” (不要做中国人的孩子，饿极了他们会把你吃掉).<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> David Wang, “The Literary World of Mo Yan,” 489–490. A similar point is made in *The Monster That Is History*, 145.

<sup>83</sup> I have tried here to restrict the outline to representative authors and works that rigorously respected the criteria of children’s association with education/culture or cannibalism. However, the scope of works under scrutiny may be way larger if we adopt a more metaphoric understanding of (cultural) cannibalism, whose functions extend way beyond the real (or imaginarily real) act of eating children, but involves symbolic violence, too. One may think, for example, of the hooligan youth in Wang Shuo’s 王朔 (b. 1958) novels, whose destinies have been cannibalised by the historical vicissitudes of the People’s Republic. The tragic fate of the main character of *Huozhe* 活着 (*To Live*) by Yu Hua 余华 (b. 1960), who remains alone after the members of his family, including his children, become indirect victims of the violence of history, likewise falls in the category. The son trying to drag his morally-upstanding father into his own life of consumerism and hedonism in Zhu Wen’s 朱文 (b. 1967) “Wo ai meiyuan” 我爱美元 (*I Love Dollars*) symbolises instead a child beyond moral salvation, devoured by the extreme individualism of today’s Chinese society. Even more so do the young characters of Sheng Keyi’s *Yeman shengzhang* 野蛮生长 (*Wild Fruit*), whose hopes—and lives—are constantly thwarted by political, economic or social violence. Although imposing a conscious, albeit silent, cry to save the children upon these authors would perhaps be an overinterpretation, by all means they can be read together in the light of an analysis focused on the various incarnations of the cannibal-society metaphor.

This brief overview did not want to produce a genealogy, but rather to pick some relevant examples to show how the motifs of education and cannibalism have continued to appear in contemporary Chinese literature and to associate themselves with children. Once again, Fan's story oversteps the purely referential function often associated with migrant workers' productions and establishes an important connection with this long-standing literary tradition. Children appear also in other works of hers than "Wo shi Fan Yusu," also beyond the shopfloor and urban villages. Probably, the work where Fan exhibits a most Lu Xun-ian sensibility, in addition to the memoir, is "Yi ge nongmingong muqin de zibai" 一个农民工母亲的自白 (Confessions of a Migrant Mother), dedicated to a disturbing case of a group suicide of four left-behind children in Bijie, a poor area in Guizhou province, occurred on 9 June 2015. The poem is interesting not only because of the reappropriation of the otherwise stigmatising term *nongmingong* (the PLC and Migrant Workers Home's distaste for the word is illustrated in chapter Three), but also because it anticipates the socially-performative role of "returning motherly love" that Fan claims in "Wo shi Fan Yusu." All migrant mothers are brought together by their social being, and this hints at their responsibility in taking care of all migrant children: "child, I and your mother have an identical name / we are called peasant-workers" (孩子,我和你们的母亲有一个一样的名字,/我们叫做农民工).<sup>84</sup> The poem does not refrain from levelling outspoken criticism on inequality in China, particularly the so-called "second-generation reds" (*hong er dai* 红二代), i.e. children of high-level cadres who benefitted from family wealth and connections, and urban disparities (again, first of all educational): "Beijing is big, so big / it can find room for a hundred hollow villas for county magistrates. / Beijing is small, so small, / it cannot find room for a single school desk for a migrant child" (北京很大,很大, /能容下一个县官空虚的百套公寓。 /北京很小,很小, /容不下流浪儿童的一张课桌).<sup>85</sup> These lines

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<sup>84</sup> Fan Yusu, "Yi ge nongmingong muqin," 79.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*.

bespeak the material size of the city *vis-à-vis* the extension of the social space it concedes to migrants. They can be seen in dialogue with a later poem, “Women shi yi qun jiazheng nügong” (We Are a Crowd of Domestic Workers) written by Li Wenli, another member of the PLC and a domestic worker herself, where a similar image occurs: “But in the eyes of the capital Beijing / we are so insignificant, like a speck of dust” (可我们在首都北京的眼里/却那么渺小, 像一粒尘土一样).<sup>86</sup> A final outcry wraps up Fan’s poem:

我祈求,我的孩子,  
毕节的孩子,  
农民工的孩子,  
都有来生。  
在来生,  
所有母亲的孩子,  
不叫留守儿童,  
不叫流浪儿童,  
他们都叫做,  
六十年前,  
毛爷爷起的名字,  
祖国的花朵。

I beg that my children,  
Bijie’s children,peasant-workers’ children  
may all have a next life.  
That in the next life

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<sup>86</sup> Li Wenli, “Women shi yi qun.”



all mothers' children  
not be called left-behind children,  
not be called floating children,  
but all with the name  
that sixty years ago  
Grandpa Mao chose for them,  
flowers of the motherland.<sup>87</sup>

Fan's cry to "Save the (migrant) children" is quite explicit here, but can be spotted throughout her whole oeuvre. They must be saved by the risk of being devoured by poverty, destitution, or the assembly line, a destiny which is clearly presented as no less dreadful than that of the victims of the Lu Xun-ian madman's cannibalising society. Children are also the vehicle through which identification with migrant workers as a social cohort is made possible. In this sense, what is relevant for your discussion here is the fact that Fan draws on a literary tradition, not only as a source of inspiration, but also as raw material that she actively develops in her own direction. The widespread presence (or citation) of children as the signifier for both a material referent (migrant children themselves) and a more abstract signified (the condition of youth impaired by social circumstances) evolves into Fan's effort "to return motherly love" stems from her maternal care towards her daughters but extends to the rest of the community, thus suggesting a possibility for solidarity:

我来到大城市求生，成为社会底层的弱者。作为农村强者的女儿，经常受到城里人的白眼和欺侮。这时，我想：是不是人遇到比自己弱的人就欺负，能取得生理上的快感？或者是基因复制？从那时起，我有了一个念头，我碰到每一个和我一样的弱者，就向他们传递爱和尊严。

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<sup>87</sup> Fan Yusu, "Yi ge nongmingong muqin," 83.

After coming to the city to seek for a living, I became part of the weak at the lower rungs of society. As the daughter of a strong rural woman, I often had to suffer the disdainful looks of city people and to endure their bullying. In that moment, I thought: Isn't it that people like to bully those who are weaker than them, to obtain some sort of physiological delight? Or is it a matter of genetic reproduction? From that moment on, I had an idea: Every time I would meet another weak person like me, I would pass on love and respect to them.<sup>88</sup>

#### **4.4. Towards a new aesthetics**

This chapter has demonstrated how the production of Fan's aesthetics is located at the intersection between her own ideas about literature, the tradition where she is textually situated (which is plainer to see from textual analysis, but often overlooked), and how she enters that tradition in a peculiarly creative way. In this sense, Fan is striving to make her literature the product of an authentic literary mind (intertextuality is key here, because it helps entering literature in its own right) rather than just social experience translated into words. The turn from Lu Xun-ian "Save the children," and its later incarnations in post-Mao literature, into "Save the (migrant) children," and the rearticulations of important literary tropes like moral agency and fate in the terms of a female migrant worker's life, where the personal and the social inevitably juxtapose, are examples of this intersection.

Family and the possibilities for solidarity in the city around family itself are a central part of Fan's poetics. This characteristic may appear unexpected in a literature supposedly more centred on other social aggregations, like class. At first glance, it may even seem a typical story of endurance on the part of an oppressed individual, who displays a positive moral and ethical conduct centred on

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<sup>88</sup> Fan Yusu, "Wo shi Fan Yusu," 13.

the family, passing it on to her children. However, in a time of serious class fragmentation and considering the unprecedented problems arising in rural-urban migrant workers' identity construction, being neither fully urban nor fully rural, perhaps there is no oddity here. The decline of class politics beyond its prescriptive symbolic authority firmly held by the party-state and the end of class-based welfare in China may well be beyond the return to family as the most basic bulk of interpersonal support. Like Liu Dongwu has remarked, "As non-natives, the substance of [migrant worker authors] is standing in the drifting space between 'here' and 'not-here'" (作为异乡人, [打工作家]的本质是处于“在”与“不在”的游离之间).<sup>89</sup> It is in this drifting space that Fan reflects on the possibilities for solidarity. Hers is no simple kinship, but more of a radical kinship, or social kinship: like it has been demonstrated above, the meaning of family solidarity extends to the whole community of migrant workers. Migrant mothers are presented as taking care of all migrant children as they were their own, and their communality is emphasised throughout Fan's oeuvre, and the call to "return motherly love" on to others is the act that extends from the family to the community. Moral action, while not abolishing surrounding structures, serves as a valid form of self-determination here.

Moral action, however, does not escape one central characteristic of self-ownership as described by Knight (discussed above): it is eminently individual. In exposing the shortcomings of education officials or the "bullying" of urban citizens against her, Fan is bringing up cases of contingent problems or personal misbehaviour, not structural questions. Her proposed interpersonal solidarity likewise relies heavily on the individual, to the point that she has been describes as having "a leftist form" (左翼式的) in her discussion and focus, but "not so leftist" (不那么左翼) in the causes singled out.<sup>90</sup> Actually, this is one more element to understand the complexities of Fan's aesthetics. Here is where her personal ideas on literature come in handy: Fan did not hide that her

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<sup>89</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Zhengti*, 128.

<sup>90</sup> Ai Xiang, "'Fan Yusu' yu shidai de 'Fan Yusu,'" 128.

main interest in literature lies in its ability to probe the human condition, rather than society in the sense of proletarian or leftist literary traditions (which is not in contradiction with social commitment, considering that one point of 20th-century revolutionary literature was precisely to address the totality of the human condition from a proletarian standpoint). Her attention is less explicitly focused on a class society than it is on an “absurd” world dominated by fate. It would be incorrect, however, to infer that this inclination hides the reality of social relations. The two elements coexist, and form part of Fan’s aesthetics, together with the unsaid but ever-present experientiality of the story—Fan is not producing fiction, but conveying her life story, and the story of people in her social group/community/class together with her own, in specific literary terms, consistently with the basic traits identified by Li Yunlei for nonfiction.

Fan’s work is a case in point to show that migrant workers’ literature is not necessarily characterised by a strict separation between the referential and the imaginative, the instrumental and the expressive, the narrative and the lyrical, the individual and the social—to sum up, the social and the literary. Instead of constituting mutually negating dichotomies, these dimensions interact with each other, and cannot be approached as separate binaries, where one (an author, but also a critic) has to make an “either or” decision. On the formal level, the story does not present many peculiarities, and it appears in a fairly plain colloquial language. However, Fan makes an intensive use of metaphors, rhetoric devices and intertextual connections to express the basic points of the migrant worker’s experience in a less immediate, more “elevated” fashion. This is what brings “Wo shi Fan Yusu,” and Fan’s work in general, farther from a purely mimetic type of self-ethnography (one of the attributes of subaltern narratives according to Sun Wanning),<sup>91</sup> and closer to a narrative where the social issues at the centre of narration are represented in a creative (and subjective) way. In this sense, the way the social relevance of Fan’s work is expressed is precisely what confers it artistic significance as well, overcoming the commonly-held dichotomy between the two.

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<sup>91</sup> Sun Wanning, *Subaltern China*, 193.

***Chapter Five.***  
***Howl of the Factory, Workshop of Poetry: Xiao Hai***

The chapter on Fan Yusu has introduced several basic problems in the production and reception of workers' literature, but also started to explore how art and social themes intermingle in a productive way. The present chapter purports to continue this investigation by dealing with another case study, shifting the focus from the nonfictional memoir to poetry, and specifically to Xiao Hai, the most prolific poet of the PLC. The chapter combines Xiao Hai's personal experience of labour and displacement that eventually brought him to Beijing with an examination of three different types of poetry produced by him, namely national, factory and urban poetry and rewritings of other poets' or singers' works. By doing so, the chapter aims to highlight the main characteristics of Xiao Hai's creative sensibility, concentrating in particular on his intertextual references, which are highly indicative of the way Xiao Hai understand his own activity of writing poetry. This investigation is useful not only to reconstruct the complex web of unexpected references that characterises contemporary workers' poetry, but also to discuss the relationship between the singular and the plural in Xiao Hai's oeuvre—namely, to what extent it is the expression of the author's self as a subjective singularity and/or touches directly upon social themes that concern migrant workers in general, although through ways and references that would have been unthinkable in classical working-class culture.

**5.1. Xiao Hai's roaming in life and poetry**

我一脚踏在工厂 一手托着太阳

身在遥远他乡 心底泛起波浪

纵有再多的乏味与不甘 可真不知道我们又该能怎样

我一脚踏在工厂 一手托着太阳 钟表天天摇摆 流水年年流淌

他们说东方是二十一世纪加工制造的领头羊 是不是我们是已麻木了腐朽了习惯了这看似正常的  
不正常

我一手托着太阳

one foot planted in the factory one hand holding up the sun

living in a strange land far away waves oozing up from the heart

all around, yet more insipidity and reluctance but what are we supposed to do

one foot planted in the factory one hand holding up the sun

clock swinging day after day water flowing year after year

they say the East is the bellwether of the sweatshops of the twenty-first century isn't it that we have  
already become numb about rotten away got used to this normality-looking abnormality?

one hand is holding up the sun<sup>1</sup>

This is the final part of a relatively long poem by Xiao Hai, written, according to the postscript, on 26 September 2013, out of “perplexity and bafflement about factory life” (对工厂生活的质问与不解). The dominant aspect of the poem is suggested by its key verse (and title), that repeats like a refrain: “one foot planted in the factory one hand holding up the sun.” The factory metonymically indicates Xiao Hai’s status as an industrial worker, while the sun is often used in his poetics as a metaphor of the poet, or poetry, especially because of its association with Haizi 海子—the beloved poet of the 1980s who committed suicide at a tender age, and has lived on as a “martyr of poetry.” The strange land conjures up displacement and migration, while the swinging clock and

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<sup>1</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchan de haojiao*, 82.

the water flowing give an idea of the fast pace of life on the assembly line (it should not go unnoticed how *flowing water*, *liushui* 流水, is also present in the Chinese word for *assembly line*, *liushuixian* 流水线). Bewilderment is all over the place, especially when the poet mentions an indistinct “They” proclaiming the East the world’s sweatshop, in fact the forerunner of a new type of labour relations for the new century, opposed to a “We” quite at loss with what is going on, but also aware that it is just a “normality-looking abnormality.” In the end, poetry appears to score a triumph—the foot planted in the factory disappears, and only the hand holding up the sun remains.

Xiao Hai—or Hu Xiaohai 胡小海, as he sometimes calls himself using his real surname—is one of the most prolific authors in Picun. His real name is Hu Liushuai 胡留帅, but he adopted “Xiao Hai” as pen-name in a tribute to Haizi. He was born on 27 August 1987 in Shangqiu, a town in the central Henan province, which has been an important supplier of migrant labour since the 1980s—and is, as he never forgets to remind, the birthplace of Zhuangzi. He left formal education at 14, completing his studies at a technical school in the county seat. He then went to “the legendary Shenzhen” (传说的深圳)<sup>2</sup> in 2003 to do an internship in an electronics factory.<sup>3</sup> He eventually stayed four years in Guangdong, changing factories multiple times. In 2007 he moved to Ningbo, where he switched workplaces four times, before going to Suzhou in 2011. He attempted an evasion from factory life by working as a salesperson, delivery worker, waiter, clerk, street vendor, even trying to crash *The Voice of China*, but none of these turned out to be a viable solution, and his meagre resources made him realise he had no choice but to return to the factory. These failed attempts at escaping from the grim destiny of a lifetime on the assembly line made him feel “like a screw, just turning and turning all the time, a living machine, squashing my every bone and blood vessel” (像颗螺丝钉一样，只是在不停的转不停的转，生存的机器，碾压过我身上的每一根

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<sup>2</sup> Xiao Hai, 2019a: 129.

<sup>3</sup> The dismal reality of many such internships has been investigated by sociology (Chan, Pun and Selden, “Interns or Workers?”).

骨头，每一个血管).<sup>4</sup> Here we have the post-socialist screw again, a symbol of diminishment and exploitation, instead of nobility. “I didn’t know,” he stresses, “if I was producing value or trash” (我真的不知道自己到底是在创造价值还是制造垃圾).<sup>5</sup>

Unbeknownst to him, serendipity awaited. Since his very first “journey out into the world,” he “discovered” Xu Wei 许巍 and Wang Feng 汪峰, two stars of Chinese rock music, igniting his musical passion. While in Ningbo, he also started reading Tang and Song poetry. How he came to it is no mystery, as such poetry is part of any school’s curriculum; what is relevant to him personally is how he framed such “re-discovery”: in a period of strong psychological loss, reading classic poetry gave him a feeling of “self-understanding” (知己一样). He claims to have memorised up to 200 poems, and calls this his first experience at “self-education” (自我教育).<sup>6</sup> He tried his hand at practice as well, writing 200 to 300 poems in Tang-Song style, most of which remain unpublished, as Xiao Hai’s anthologised publications only have 18 poems from the Ningbo period (2007–2011). Xiao Hai himself considers them just “doggerels” (打油诗) and downplays them by saying that he knew nothing of metrics and structure.<sup>7</sup> His initial choice of imitating the classical style is not surprising, given the widespread understanding of “patriotic or romantic lyrical verse” and “the classical genre” as the quintessence of Chinese poetry.<sup>8</sup> Xiao Hai acknowledges a vague but “important direct relation” (直接重要的关系) with the factory experience behind his decision to start writing (the “foot planted in the factory”).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Xiao Hai, *ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Xiao Hai, “Yi ge Zhongguo qingnian,” 36.

<sup>6</sup> Xiao Hai, “Yi ge daling shibai,” 130.

<sup>7</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 25

<sup>8</sup> Inwood, *Verse Going Viral*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Xiao Hai, “Wo zai chejian li,” 285.



Later, during a visit to Hangzhou, he bought a collection of Haizi's poems from a street vendor, and was immediately mesmerised. Xiao Hai says that he learned from Haizi "how to look in the face of my soul with honesty" (真诚面对自己的灵魂) and find his true self again (做真实的自己).<sup>10</sup> He recalls how he would read poetry in the brief chunks of free time from the assembly line schedule, when he would feel exhausted. In the same windows of time he would also write something of his own. Sometimes the boss would find him writing, throw away his papers and fine him for disrupting production.<sup>11</sup> Late at night, after getting off work, Xiao Hai would go to a nearby internet café and upload his poems on QQ. Clearly, his encounter with Haizi, and concurrently with Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan's music, also exposed him to alternative themes, forms and expression that classical Chinese poetry, that he was very swift to integrate in his own production.

Given his passion for music, he opted to approach famous singers on social media to share his poems. One of them, Zhang Chu 张楚, eventually wrote back. The two started a conversation, with Zhang also sending him books and finally recommending him to Xu Duo and the New Workers' Art Troupe. In 2016, already in Jiaxing, Zhejiang province, for work, Xiao Hai finally took the decision to move to Beijing. The first thing he did in the capital was to visit Picun, whose particular reality captivated him from the very first moment. He spotted a class of the literature group, but felt inadequate to join, finding the courage to do so only after learning that all the other participants were just ordinary migrant workers as well,<sup>12</sup> although another reason may have been that he could not become a member of Xu Duo's and Sun Heng's music group due to his undeveloped musical skills. He found an occupation as a shopkeeper in Yingezhuangcun, just next to Picun, selling cheap-price clothes in a store managed by the Migrant Workers Home. At long last, his wandering day had come to an end.

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<sup>10</sup> Xiao Hai, "Yi ge daling shibai," 131.

<sup>11</sup> Miao Kunpeng, "Cong chejian dao Picun."

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

Since joining the literature group, Xiao Hai's already prolific production has spiked up. His works up to 2017 were collected in an individual anthology, titled *Gongchang de haojiao* 工厂的嚎叫 (*Howl of the Factory*) in a homage to Ginsberg's signature poem, "Howl." In December 2018, he won the First Labourers' Literature Prize for the poetry section. In spring 2019, thanks to Shi Libin's recommendation, he attended an intensive writing course at the Lao She Institute for Literature. Together with Fan Yusu, he has become one of the most visible members of the group, a constant presence in almost every report by official and unofficial news outlets. Such a strong attention on the part of actors from very different backgrounds seems motivated by Xiao Hai epitomising a sort of grassroots, non-professional individual who is using art to endure despite the hardships of his life.<sup>13</sup> In a way, this is symptomatic of media attention towards migrant workers' poetry in general. As van Crevel remarks, the "mediagenicity" of the genre comes from it being understood as a form of "romantic" salvation from the oppression and dullness of factory life, and in the case of Xiao Hai, this representation adds up to his personal gregarious and entertaining character, as well as his recognised talent.<sup>14</sup>

Most of these biographical details are taken from his autobiographical essay "Yi ge daling shibai nan qingnian de zibai" 一个大龄失败男青年的自白 (Confessions of a Failed Over-age Young Man), published on the first issue of *Xin gongren wenxue* in May 2019, but originally published on the *Renjian* 人间 (*The Livings*) website on 18 July 2017, and later included in the theatrical piece *Women2s. Laodong jiaoliu shichang* 我们2s: 劳动交流市场 (We2s. The Labour

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<sup>13</sup> The *China Daily*, for example, dedicated to him the very first episode of a series called *Zhui meng rensheng* 追梦人生 (*Lives Seeking After Dreams*), aired in 2019. This title stands in the same vein as a 2017 article by the *Global Times* focusing on him, whose headline reads "Migrant Workers Use Poetry, Rock'n'roll to Uplift Spirits Amid Evictions"—with a reference to the winter 2017 evictions in Beijing.

<sup>14</sup> Van Crevel, "Debts."

Exchange Market). The opening lines, just like the title, unveil an important trait of Xiao Hai's character and persona:

我也是一个失败的大龄男青年，为什么这样说呢？买不起车，买不起房，没有驾照，找不到对象，我的那一点工资也只能勉强维持基本的生活开销。当然我今天过来，绝对不是向大家诉苦来了。

I am also just a failed over-age young man. Why do I say so? I can't afford a car, can't afford a flat, don't have a licence, can't find a partner, and those few bucks I make with my wage just keep me stuck in everyday expenses. But of course I've not come here today to complain in front of everybody.<sup>15</sup>

This metatextual reincarnation of the “rational fatalism” that Pozzana considers characteristic of migrant workers' poetry<sup>16</sup> delineates here a negative identity that stems from cynically accepting the inability to conform the dominant order of socio-cultural expectations (to wit, what “has not worked” in his life), and turning it into a distinctive trademark, which recurs frequently in his production. His frustration at perceived defeat is always there, though, mixed with the sense of having let his family down, like in a later poem of his: “I can't reconcile with my dad and I can't come to terms with reality” (我无法和爸爸和解也无法和现实妥协).<sup>17</sup> This is understandable considering that his father had to sell their crops to obtain the money to support his early steps “out to the world.” In general, migrant workers' “loss of face” for failing to improve their social condition in the promised land of urban prosperity is a major reason keeping return to the home

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<sup>15</sup> Xiao Hai, “Yi ge daling shibai,” 128.

<sup>16</sup> Pozzana, “Poetry.”

<sup>17</sup> Xiao Hai, “Yi ge Zhongguo qingnian,” 88.

village out of their set of possible choices.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Xiao Hai's life journey, while ultimately one-of-a-kind, as every life journey is, remains inseparable from the collective life of migrant workers as a social cohort.

In the final words of his "Confessions" (such "confessions" being an important form of short autobiographical account in China's cultural tradition), Xiao Hai circles back to negative identity, but supplements it with a declaration of his agency towards art, society, fellow migrants, and himself:

我是胡小海，一个打工十五年的失败大龄男青年。为了我们的社会更好，为了我们的生活更好，我选择自己给自己代言。

I am Hu Xiaohai, a failed over-age young man with fifteen years of migrant labour behind my shoulders. For the improvement of our society, for the improvement of our lives, I choose to speak up for myself.<sup>19</sup>

Such self-awareness and disposition to talk about himself, to build his own persona, is indeed a peculiarity of Xiao Hai's, as opposed to the majority of the Picun literature group, and it mirrors also in his effort at creating his own commentary.<sup>20</sup> He does not only write poetry, he also writes *about* it. This does not necessarily reveal an awareness of poetry as organic art, that we find in other well-established poets, also from subaltern backgrounds, but rather a confidence in what poetry means for him and how he approaches it. In his discussions, he rarely mentions other poets except

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<sup>18</sup> Kan, "The New 'Lost Generation,'" 70–71.

<sup>19</sup> Xiao Hai, "Yi ge daling shibai," 133.

<sup>20</sup> Van Crevel, "I and We."

Haizi and Ginsberg,<sup>21</sup> revealing a lack of interest in engaging with the canon and the inner dynamics of the field. For Xiao Hai, poetry seems to work more as a means, or more precisely, to use van Crevel's compelling wording, as a "meme in Chinese cultural tradition" (meme here as the cultural counterpart of the gene), more than a structured field or a full-fledged profession.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, despite his discursive concession that his work should contribute to the betterment of society, or his stated hope that it may be helpful for other youths in his condition, poetry is a deeply subjective enterprise, a search for the self in the evasion from the oppressive monotony of the everyday:

我就是那样在机台，流水线，集体宿舍与公交车上记下一行行一个普通工人的悲喜苦乐与青春挽歌。将孤独和青春、现实与理想的青年迷失以反思、呢喃、愤怒或嚎叫的方式写下来。就那样日积月累到目前为止发牢骚五百余篇。我觉得我一直在找寻自己，可到那时一直还是从未将真正的自己找到。

Just like that, by the machines, on the assembly line, in the shared dormitories or on public transports, I would record, line by line, the sorrows and joys of an ordinary worker and the elegy of his youth. Solitude, youth and the loss of my best years, both real and dreamed—I would write them all down, by means of pondering, twittering, bursting into rage or howling. That's how all those five hundred grumbling poems of mine have accumulated over the years. I think I'd always been on the look for myself, but up until then I had never been able to find my true self.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This was his only answer to my question about poets he particularly likes or admires, during both our interviews on 21 September and 26 October 2019. Initially, I was surprised (and a bit upset at the obviousness of that answer), given that other members of the group are understandably much more eager to valorise their own self-education by showing off their literary knowledge.

<sup>22</sup> Van Crevel, *Walk on the Wild Side*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Xiao Hai, "Yi ge daling shibai," 131.

Michelle Yeh's concept of the "cult of poetry" may help interpret Xiao Hai's relationship with his art, at least partly. What Yeh calls the "cult of poetry" (and of *poethood*, as specified by van Crevel)<sup>24</sup> is "the phenomenon and the concomitant discourse in the 1980s and the 1990s that bestows poetry with religious significance and cultivates the image of the poet as the high priest of poetry." More generally, it "denotes a religious poetics that is based on the worship of poetry and that inspires a religious-like devotion among poets."<sup>25</sup> She goes on by sorting out the elevation and deification of poetry, the sense of crisis accompanying poetry as a religion, the elaboration of a religious-like image of the poet and the construction of a genealogy of Chinese and foreign poets as the main traits of the "cult." Now, there is nothing divine or supernatural in Xiao Hai's poetry, and the genealogy of poets is very limited and personal, not even exclusively made up of (what we would normally consider as) poets, since among his sources of inspiration we find Haizi, Ginsberg, but also Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Wang Feng. This notwithstanding, what is evident in his production, both textual and metatextual, is "the polarisation of the mundane world versus the divine world of poetry," that Yeh considers "central" to the "cult of poetry," as well as the "manifestation of the quest for self-identity, an assertion of the creative freedom and artistic autonomy."<sup>26</sup> Both elements are definitely there, just like the poet's "dual alienation (from the political establishment and the fast-growing consumer culture)". Just replace *political establishment* with *socio-economic order*, and Xiao Hai fits perfectly.<sup>27</sup>

Like the "cultist poet," Xiao Hai has a heroic, active vision of poetry in its role as a harbour in a bleak world that ignores the poet. In his case, this obliviousness is due not only to the nature of

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<sup>24</sup> Van Crevel, *Walk on the Wild Side*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Yeh, "The 'Cult of Poetry,'" 52–53.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 62, 68.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 69.

consumer society, but also to him belonging to a class condemned to invisibility in contemporary mainstream culture. Poetry should be higher than the everyday, elevating the poet with it, in a sort of spiritual escapism. During our interviews, Xiao Hai even acknowledged that, in the beginning, he felt restrained from including elements from his factory life in his poetry out of the fear that it would be tainted by such “low” themes. In fact, the early Xiao Hai’s view of poetry appears influenced by the aesthetic common sense that Inwood attributes to the non-specialist public, according to which poetry “should be more than short colloquial commentaries on the trivialities of everyday life” and therefore “more difficult and refined.”<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, his estrangement from his fellow workers, much more interested in material matters than in the obscure (as in cryptic, not the avant-garde Obscure) poets Xiao Hai would read to them during pauses from work, also had an impact. Xiao Hai makes the point at least twice throughout his “Confessions,” by drawing a comparison between himself wanting to spend his little money to buy a dictionary and his colleagues just longing for lottery tickets, or again between himself going to the internet café to upload poetry while the other workers would just play videogames. This is probably part of the reason why Xiao Hai would find Haizi so appealing, with the latter’s poetry steeped in mythical lyricism, rising to the “non-empirical world” and experienced as an alternative to the corrupt utilitarianism of material life.<sup>29</sup> However, this should not be interpreted as a divorce from social reality (which, *ça va sans dire*, is almost omnipresent in Xiao Hai’s production). After 2016 and especially following his participation in the literature group, he has adjusted this disposition and

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<sup>28</sup> Inwood, 2014: 183. It does not elude me nor am I suggesting that any absolute opposition exists between refined poetry and social poetry. As a matter of fact, Yeh also acknowledges that “the relations between ‘the cult of poetry’ and sociopolitical reality may be more complex than what has been described” (1996: 70). Whilst she was referring to the context of the 1980s- and 1990s-poetry scene, this argument stands also for our case.

<sup>29</sup> Kunze, 2012: 301, 206.

included many more earthly subjects than before.<sup>30</sup> All considered, the elevation of poetry and the exceptionalism of the poet can then be interpreted as a matter of position-taking in the opposition between art and vulgarity, not as an expulsion of the latter from the first.

The form of Xiao Hai's poetry can be considered a translation onto the aesthetic level of this general vision of poetry as primarily a means/meme. With the brief exception of the preliminary production in the Tang-Song style, only rarely do we find a scrupulous attention to form, and largely in his later production. His are mostly medium-sized poems, occasionally very short poems, and at times very lengthy ones. Most of his poetry is strongly message- and content-focused, verses and rhythm are irregularly distributed, and style is, in a word, "unconstrained."<sup>31</sup> His frequent postscripts to disclose the context behind his poems and give hints to their interpretation show that he wants to be understood and his intertextuality to be clear. In line with this, references and wording are generally concrete, but he has been able to go to both sides of the spectrum, producing both colloquial and abstract poems as well. When he appears to be more interested in form as well, Xiao Hai tends to focus on one element and build the poem around it. Such element is usually a word that supports the whole poem either thematically or structurally, and is often discontinued towards the end. In other cases, Xiao Hai uses repetitions, refrains or onomatopoeias to give a sense of rhythm and experiment with sound. Because of this, many of his poems look like song lyrics, and have actually been adapted into music by himself, which is only but one more element to infer the strong emotional influence played by music on Xiao Hai's production, even more than any well-established poetic tradition. Other formal strategies employed by the poet include working on the outer, visual side of the poem, for example by making stark oppositions (especially through adjectives) between a positive situation (usually upper-class) and a negative one (often his own).

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<sup>30</sup> This is evident from his production, but also acknowledged by himself during our interview on 26 October 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Van Crevel, 2020.



Youth and love are two of the most common elements in Xiao Hai's poetry. Youth is usually wasted or frustrated, sacrificed on the assembly line. Love is likewise unfulfilled, associated with the wasted youth, inexistent altogether, or remote and unattainable. At the same time, however, it is pure and honest, although constantly unsatisfied and unreciprocated. Wasted youth and frustrated love variously evoke angst and anger, or come along as broken dreams, generally ascribable to an unrewarding urban experience. In fact, the gulf between the sincerity of love and its unfulfillment somewhat mirrors the distance between the authenticity of nature and the artificiality of the city, another trope found here. As a result, Xiao Hai's lyrical subject sometimes appears mute or deaf.

The sun and the moon are among his favourite images. The sun, as already mentioned, is often synonymous with poetry (and Haizi), but it assumes many other meanings, including life, ancestors, epiphany, reality, secrecy, but also betrayal. The moon is likewise associated with poetry, and also love, evasion, imagination, bringing Li Bai 李白 (701–762) and other classical poets to mind.<sup>32</sup> It is also transfigured into an “iron moon” (铁月亮),<sup>33</sup> in a clear nod to Xu Lizhi's “Wo yanxia yimei tiezuo de yueliang” 我咽下一枚铁做的月亮 (I Swallowed An Iron Moon), which

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<sup>32</sup> Xiao Hai dedicates one entire poem to the moon, “Kexi le zheme hao de yuese” 可惜了这么好的月色 (A Pity, Such A Good Moonlight). In it, he pities “such a good moonlight” for having to shine over natural and artificial elements (city, people, streets, polluted rivers, collapsed mountains, clouds sold out for money), and also over the poet himself, “empty” (空空的), “lonely” (孤独的) and “wandering about in Beijing” (漂泊在北京的). The poem concludes with a bittersweet stanza where the poet admits he needs “such a good moon” to shine over “me, defeated” (失败的我), “me, in pain” (痛苦的我), “me, broken” (崩溃的我), “me, dead” (死去的我), in a tragic crescendo marked by the negative identity discussed above. In this case, the moon(light) symbolises everything that is pure and elevated, as opposed to a worldly dimension irremediably polluted by industrial society.

<sup>33</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 407.

Xiao Hai has read and has been inspired by.<sup>34</sup> Both the sun and the moon can be invisible, as the lyrical worker subject is unable to say whether it is day or night from inside the factory (another trope of migrant workers' poetry at large).<sup>35</sup> Other recurring elements include wheat (a brother to dance with amid the flames),<sup>36</sup> carrying a double significance as poetry (being Haizi's most distinctive trope) and as a metonym for the countryside; wings and flying; dreams; neon lights; ruins; mystery. Seasons, mostly spring, make frequent appearances, together with the months of March, May and June. An undertone of spirituality can be felt throughout Xiao Hai's production, also with explicit references to "God" (上帝) and the "goddess of fate" (命运女神).<sup>37</sup> Finally, history is there. Again, this may also be a borrowing from Haizi. However, while history is mostly mythical and ancestral in the latter, it tends to take on a much more contemporary connotation (and yet no less epic) in Xiao Hai. In his later production, approximately after 2017, this representation is way more nuanced and often embedded in imagery or appearing through metaphors, in what Zhang Huiyu terms an "intrusion of history into imagery."<sup>38</sup> To be fair, Xiao Hai is not alone in this among other migrant-worker poets, one of the most compelling and successful being Guo Jinniu—*en passant*, another Haizi admirer—with his "Luozucun wangshi" 罗祖村往事 (Old Days in Luozucun), where past and modern history mix up together to signify the experience of migrant labour.

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<sup>34</sup> During the interview on 21 September 2019, Xiao Hai stated he read Xu Lizhi only after joining the Picun literature group (2016). However, from his poetry and other accounts, we know that he watched the documentary film *Wo de shipian* already in 2015, where the poem makes an appearance, recited by Xu's friend Zhou Qizao 周启早.

<sup>35</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Zhengti*, 240.

<sup>36</sup> Xiao Hai, "Maizi xiongdi."

<sup>37</sup> Translating *shangdi* 上帝 as God may raise some eyebrows. However, this is justified if we connect Xiao Hai's enormous fascination with Haizi with Haizi's active intellectual conversation with Christianity (e.g. Kunze, *Struggle and Symbiosis*, 231–243). By the way, also the goddess of fate can be spotted among Haizi's verses.

<sup>38</sup> Zhang, 2020.

## 5.2. National poetry

It is along these lines that Xiao Hai's poetry has developed and changed in the last decade or so. While still characterised by intensity, passionate enthusiasm and frenzy, it tends to be less rabid and more focused, both in essence and form, and more mature, or original, in terms of imagery and structure. A comparison between two of the numerous poems that can be grouped up as Xiao Hai's national poetry is telling in this sense. By *national poetry* I mean here a body of pieces that have China itself as their subject. Xiao Hai's productive stage ranging approximately from 2012 to 2014 is probably the most patriotic of his creative history (and his patriotic works are not limited to what I call *national poetry*). This does not mean that he has since ceased to be: he still is, but he has found novel and more original ways to express his relation with the country and national history. This can be seen, for example, through two cases of his *national poetry*. The first is "Zhongguo Zhongguo" 中国 中国 (China, China), written in April 2012 together with another similar one, "Zao'an Zhongguo" 早安 中国 (Good Morning, China), vaguely reminiscent of Guo Moruo's "Cheng'an" 晨安 (Good Morning) only in its title. For the sake of comparison, "Zhongguo Zhongguo" is worth quoting in full:

我走过中原 我走过西域

我走过北国 我走过南疆

这上下五千年的历史流淌成我的血液 这万里长城的脊梁凝固成我的身躯

曾在破碎不堪的路上 我们依然昂首

在这荆棘丛生的路上 我们执着向前

哪怕前方布满曲折 哪怕明天充满磨难

我们依然蹒跚在大地上 我们依然矗立在东方

可是我该怎么来理解你 我的中国  
可是我该怎么来拥抱你 我的中国  
可是我该怎么来面对你 我的中国  
可是我该怎么来报答你 我们的中国  
中国 中国 我们的中国  
中国 中国 我们的中国

我们走过荣耀 我们走过屈辱  
我们走过暗淡 我们走过辉煌  
那来自春秋的编钟打着我的灵魂 那来自长江的波涛激荡着我的内心  
在那百花齐放的岁月 我们情愿融化  
在那汹涌澎湃的长河 我们情愿流走  
哪怕自己不再存在 哪怕生命不再灿烂  
我们情愿飞向空中 我们情愿投向太阳  
可是我该怎么来理解你 我的中国  
可是我该怎么来拥抱你 我的中国  
可是我该怎么来面对你 我的中国  
可是我该怎么来报答你 我们的中国  
中国 中国 我们的中国  
中国 中国 我们的中国

I walked across the Central Plains I walked across the Western Regions  
I walked across the Northern Kingdom I walked across the Southern Frontier  
this five-millennia history has flooded out my blood the backbone of this ten-thousand-*li* Great Wall  
has solidified in my body

once on tattered roads I still held high my head  
on these roads of shambles I persevere going forward  
although ahead is tortuous everywhere although tomorrow is full of hardships  
we still limp about on the land we still tower in the East  
but how should I understand you my China  
but how should I embrace you my China  
but how should I face you my China  
but how should I repay you our China  
China China our China  
China China our China

we walked through glory we walked through humiliation  
we walked through darkness we walked through light  
bells from an era of Spring and Autumn beat my soul waves from the Changjiang shake me  
with a time of a hundred flowers blooming we wish to blend  
with a river of surging waves we wish to flow away  
although no longer does myself exist although no longer does life shine  
we wish to fly to the sky we wish to rage to the sun  
but how should I understand you my China  
but how should I embrace you my China  
but how should I face you my China  
but how should I repay you our China  
China China our China  
China China our China<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 27–28.

The poem carries a political-lyricist echo. Whilst there is no Mao Zedong mapping the blueprint of New China like in Tian Jian's 田间 "Zuguo song" 祖国颂 (Ode to the Motherland) from 1954, nor the propagandistic overtone of Guo Moruo's "Xinhua song" 新华颂 (In Praise of New China) of 1949, it appears indebted to their grand-narrative style, sharing with them a bird's eye view of the land and the contrasting condition between a dark past and (the promise of) a glorious future, and, last but not least, a collective message typical of Maoist poetry, but less seen after the 1980s. Formally, it presents many of Xiao Hai's traits, including a fixed structure of syntactic oppositions. Each stanza can be internally split into three units, with similar formal patterns: Unit 1 on China—geographical or historical (verses 1–2); Unit 2 on the bodily connection of the poet with the country (verse 3); Unit 3 on the active proposition of the poet with respect to the motherland (verses 4–7); Unit 4, the refrain (verses 8–13).

This fixed formal scheme underpins significant differences in message, both internally and with reference to the above-mentioned precedents. In the first stanza, Unit 1 sees the wandering poet embracing the whole of China through his heroic journeys, and Unit 2 evokes a fusion of his body with the motherland. Unit 3 creates two sets of contrasts—the poet and his life's hardships, and the country and its historical adversities. The general sense of this stanza is one of persistence against the odds, delivered also by the presence of contrasting conjunctions. This sense gives way to a much stronger pride with national history in the second stanza. In Unit 1, as opposed to the geographic imagination of the first stanza, China is evoked as a historical subject. Unit 2 is again about the bodily experience of connection with the motherland, this time on a more perceptive level. In Unit 3, the poet proclaims his desire to become one with the motherland, even if that implies giving up his own self. Note how the nation appears through cultural tokens (the "five-thousand-year history", the Great Wall) and Confucian vocabulary (Spring and Autumn, the hundred flowers/hundred schools of thought). Xiao Hai's romantic heroism appears in the transformative process of "I" into a "We" indistinguishable from the motherland as an imagined geographic,

political and cultural entity. The general message can be found in the poet's pride in realising the juxtaposition of his perseverance against all hardships and China's endurance as a nation, and the poem might be easily read as a sample of (cultural) nationalism—"we still tower in the East" (我们依然矗立在东方). However, the poet reveals strong doubts on how he should fulfil his patriotic duty (Units 4). The relation between "I" and "We" is not resolved at all (*pace* the verse "although myself no longer exists"; 哪怕自己不再存在), and the poem ends with the author's "heavenly questions" and a melancholic invocation of China.

"Zuguo wo ai ni" 祖国 我爱你 (Motherland, I Love You), written on the occasion of the 70th founding anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 2019, is different in many a way:

1

如果爱真的可以说出来  
那最好也让爱变得纯洁一点  
我选择在南胡庄爱你  
她是中原腹地  
黄河边上的一个小村庄  
是祖先繁衍生息之地  
也是我这样一个异乡游子  
最想说爱你的地方  
我选择在老家东屋麦囤前  
用麦粒上那黑色的芒  
去触碰你苦难而辉煌的星辰

2

我是背着黄河水长大的孩子啊  
黄河的水有多黄  
我的骨骼内部就有多少次成长与断裂  
我的脊梁骨刻下过烽烟千里  
也刻下残破城楼  
以及生锈而暴戾的铁马金戈  
刻下过九一八的耻辱  
也刻下无数烈士的浴血奋战  
和中国人民从此站立起来了的雪耻之时  
刻下了祖父春耕秋种的犁铧  
祖母日织夜摇的吱呀纺车  
父亲寒来暑往打工的城市  
母亲四季农忙晾晒的粮食  
还刻下我工厂车间挥汗如雨的青春身影  
刻下无数放肆的春天  
和十月的铮亮光明  
黄河就这样沉默着汹涌着从我脊背  
胸腔 头颅 四肢间滔滔流过  
而我只倒影出一片自你而来的圣洁云朵

3

想说爱你的方言



于北京之夜的地铁里暗哑  
爱你的心跳摇晃着在地心深处轰鸣不止  
北方的夜晚如燕山一样幽深黢黑  
我爱你的巨大呼声  
在灵魂的银河间久久回荡  
一粒土一粒土般的累积  
直至于粗糙而泛黄的野草尖循循传出

4

是的  
秋天适合群星间舞蹈  
适合旷野里高歌  
适合田地中劳作  
更适合右手触摸胸口  
翻开祖先的底色  
然后以小麦 水稻 高粱 玉米  
滚过山脉的速度  
铿锵而蓬勃的唱出祖国 我爱你  
我爱你啊 祖国

1

if love can truly be spoken  
then better let love be a bit purer  
I choose to love you in Nanhuzhuang  
she is a small village along the Yellow River

in the inner Central Plains  
where the ancestors were born and prospered  
and where I, a wanderer in strange lands,  
most wish to say I love you  
it is beside the pile of wheat in my home's east room  
holding the blackened awn on top of a grain  
that I choose to touch your suffering and shining stars

2

I'm a child who has grown up with the waters of the Yellow River on his back  
how yellow is the Yellow River  
how many growths and breaks inside my bones  
thousands of *li* of signal fires are carved on my backbone  
and shattered gate towers  
and also warriors with daggers on armoured horses, rusty but fierce  
carved on it is the humiliation of 18 September  
and unnumbered martyrs' bloody battles  
and in the moment of vengeance when the Chinese people stood up  
carved on it were grandfather's ploughshare during spring ploughing and autumn planting  
grandmother's spinning wheel creaking day and night  
the city where father went to work from season to season  
the grain harvested by mother and left drying in the sun  
and carved on it is the youthful shadow of me dripping with sweat in the workshop  
countless unrestrained springs  
and the magnificent radiance of October  
just like this does the Yellow River, silent and surging, smoothly  
flows from my backbone my chest my head my limbs  
but I can only reflect backwards the pure clouds arrived from you

3

the dialect wishing to say I love you  
is made voiceless in the subways of Beijing's nights  
the heart beating with love for you is shacking unending thunders in its deepest reaches  
northern nights are black and silent like the Yan Mountains  
my deafening cry of love for you  
reverberates for long in the Milky Way of the soul  
it accumulates like granules of earth after granules of earth  
until it spreads neatly on the tops of raw and yellowing grass

4

that's right  
autumn lends itself to dancing in the midst of the stars  
lends itself to singing loud in the wilderness  
lends itself to working in the fields  
and lends itself even more to right hands touching the chest  
to unravel the foundation of the ancestors  
and finally rolling through mountain ranges  
at the speed of wheat paddy sorghum maize  
my clanging and vigorous voice sings: motherland, I love you  
oh, I love you, motherland<sup>40</sup>

This one is way less predictable and plastered, but more personal and open to interpretation—  
which is even more relevant given the fact that it was penned in a period when a lot of poetry was

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<sup>40</sup> Xiao Hai, "Zuguo wo ai ni."

being produced for the anniversary, much of it dull and unprovocative. One does not have to travel far from Xiao Hai, for example by looking at very “official” publications, to find much more grandiloquent poems on the anniversary. The fourth issue of *Xin gongren wenxue* contained many poems magnifying the glory of the nation and its history with predictable sloganising, showing (unsurprisingly) the persistent strength of patriotic feelings also among subaltern workers. Xiao Hai’s poem itself, despite more personal, is not immune from the political phrasebook (*tifa* 提法).

Yet, the opening verses already expose the main characteristic that sets this poem apart from “Zhongguo Zhongguo,” namely, the fact that Xiao Hai’s creative individuality is markedly more present here in a structured way. In the first part, Xiao Hai emphasises his *individual* choice to utter his praise for the motherland in his own terms, from his native rural area. Aesthetically and politically, chanting about the motherland from the countryside also implies some sort of root-seeking, but on the part of a person whose urban dream has proven to be unattainable and now seems intent on reclaiming his “native” pride. The second part reactivates the process of the nation’s embodiment inside the poet’s bones, and that is coherent with “Zhongguo Zhongguo.” However, while the latter is impregnated with grand history, here such narrative—still present in the form of allusions to a distant past of signal fires, mounted warriors and gate towers—enters a negotiation with the microhistory of Xiao Hai’s peasant family, and his own experience as a migrant labourer. As a result of this negotiation, “the pure clouds” (圣洁云朵), an important visual element in art as well, convey an ideal and neutral vision of the motherland but can only be reflected “backwards” (倒影)—no “fusion,” this time. This appears reinforced by the first two verses of the third part, on the whole more nocturnal and introspective, where the dialect’s constraint suggests (in addition to the dominance of *Putonghua*) that the subjectivity of the migrant poet is inhibited by cultural invisibility and social muteness. In the fourth and final part, the poem is again epic and grandiose. However, the heroic “I” here is present in a highly different fashion than in “Zhongguo Zhongguo.” In the latter, it was explicit, *wo* 我 being repeated multiple times in the

text; in “Zuguo wo ai ni,” “I” rarely appears, but reverberates throughout the whole poem as a subjective, creative singularity.

This is a sign of a more general development of Xiao Hai’s poetics, characterised by more compactness, stronger refinement in terms of imagery and metaphors, and nuanced personality. None of this entails the abandonment of a heroic vision of the poet and poetry, which actually works as a *fil rouge* throughout Xiao Hai’s production. What is discarded, however, is the heavy use of postscripts. If my previous hypothesis that paratext was there to make all references explicit is correct, then the decision to abandon this pattern may be underpinned by a different kind of dialogue Xiao Hai wants to establish with his readers. Although far from a “pressing questioning of the very consistency of Chinese culture, of what keeps it together beyond its own self-image,”<sup>41</sup> identified by Pozzana as a key trait of Obscure poetry, both these poems (and also the fact that, in all their difference, they come from the same author) contribute from a different perspective to investigate the signifier *China* as a “big question mark” (大问号), as Yang Lian puts it.<sup>42</sup> We may likewise approach more signifiers as big question marks—*poetry* for sure, with and without the determiner *migrant workers*’. Here we find no trace of the referential immediacy, coarse language or down-to-earth themes one might expect from a migrant worker without formal education.

### 5.3. Factory poetry

As already mentioned above, Xiao Hai’s writing relation with the factory has been a troubled one, and this is yet one more reason to explore in further depth the way he has handled industry-related themes in his poetic production. Or, to return to the programmatic poem in the opening of the chapter, to examine how the poet’s foot has been “planted” into the factory. Applying the same

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<sup>41</sup> Pozzana, *La poesia pensante*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 54, 57.

method I employed to circumvent what I have called *national poetry*, here I will refer to *factory poetry* as the body of poems that directly address the factory as a physical space, the labour regime existing within it, and workers that populate it.

We have already examined how Xiao Hai was initially timid at writing about the factory in a direct way. When he did, in his early poetry, the factory was usually in the background, with a few exceptions. Living conditions of factory workers were at times addressed as well, and more frequently as Xiao Hai grew personally and artistically, but they were generally framed in a humanist fashion, instead of disclosing their intimate connection with their context. In our interviews, Xiao Hai admitted that there were two main reasons restraining him from writing about the factory, the first being the belief that poetry had to rise above the mundane, the everyday and the existent, and the second, closely related to the first, being a certain feeling of uneasiness at tainting his verses with a “low” vocabulary. Poetry required high language. This “prejudice” reflects wider and pervasive disputes on the nature of “literariness” (*wenxuexing*), so poignant and urgent when it comes to workers’ writing, where the dominant aesthetic contributes in encouraging authors to dissimulate the real conditions of life with an aura of sublimation.

Watching *Wo de shipian*, reading contemporary worker poets, and, above all, participating in the activities of the Picun literature group made Xiao Hai change his mind. While there indeed is factory poetry in his pre-Beijing production, discovering that other workers were interested in arts, that they could *do* it, and enter this domain with their own socio-cultural experience and then play according to their own rules, was surely an encouragement. In Xiao Hai’s own words,

学习了以后，知道了更多的打工诗人以后，就知道自己的经历可以去写出来。就像我之前可能不好意思用什么电阻了，什么螺丝啊，就不好意思直接就这样写啊，但是我看了那么多打工诗人写的那么真实，那么的有力，我觉得可以这样写，还是有影响。

After studying and finding out that there were so many more migrant worker poets, I knew that I could put my own experience into words. Previously for example I was perhaps a bit embarrassed in using words like electric resistance, or screw, and so on, I mean, writing such unabashedly way embarrassed me. But then I saw that so many migrant-worker poets were writing in such a realistic and strong way, and that definitely had some influence in me realising that I could write like that.<sup>43</sup>

For Xiao Hai, the very existence of worker poets is not a big deal. The population of industrial labourers is so vast, he argues, that it is only natural that some with a fondness in literature may emerge. Actually, in the examples he cited during our interview, he extended this to arts in general, since he brought up the names of Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 and Bei Dao 北岛, who were both sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>44</sup> Taking Xu Lizhi as his main example,<sup>45</sup> he continues that the most important fruit of worker authors is the spiritual strength contained in their verses, capable of “shaking us” (震撼我们), a strength “one-million times more beneficial than money or the increase of our salary” (比那个金钱, 比我们的涨工资要更有利 100 万

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<sup>43</sup> Interview on 26 October 2019.

<sup>44</sup> After Xiao Hai mentioned Bei Dao, during our interview on 26 October 2019, I also brought up the name of Shu Ting 舒婷. Formerly a sent-down-youth herself, she wrote a poem called “Liushuixian” 流水线 (Assembly Line) based on her working experience. Not surprisingly, it was included in *Wo de shipian*. While the poem is absolutely able to depict “the erasure of individuality in an unnatural, dehumanizing environment of mechanized mass production” (Yeh, “Misty Poetry,” 521), it also highlights one major difference between avant-garde and migrant-worker poets, for it relies on a far less immediate network of images and symbols.

<sup>45</sup> What strikes me are the numerous similarities one can find between Xiao Hai and Xu Lizhi. They share several aspects, including many dark ones. The ability to turn life into poetry with a strong individual tone (see van Crevel, “Misft”), the focus on life’s caducity *vis-à-vis* the time lost in the fast pace of factory life, the love for literature per se and as a possible way out of wage slavery, and crude reality hanging over like a sword of Damocles, ready to strike back and annihilate any hope for change. For Xu Lizhi, the outcome—his own suicide—was tragic. One indeed would hope for Xiao Hai’s fate to turn out differently.

倍) — stressing again the superiority of poetry with respect to the immediate, and somewhat echoing the Migrant Workers Home's standpoint that creating an autonomous culture for workers is more important than immediate material gains. This strength takes the form of a solace for individuals worn down by the rhythms of the factory, but it is possible only if these "low" themes acquire their full citizenship rights in art:

我曾经想过我写的歌会在工体唱，下面上万人跟我合，能给大家带来慰藉带来安慰，我觉得标签啊或者代号都无所谓。我觉得温暖。这我真想过，但是我不知道我是一个“打工诗人”。我那时候出了一本诗集以后，感觉这个标签啊或者这个是代号都无所谓。因为我们是工人，我们表达自己的真实情感。无论是诗歌也好，小说也好，只要是表达自己真实情感，我们就没有麻木的，就是说完全失去自己就好了。文学记录这样的东西才是真正的有力的文学，有生命力的文学。

Once I dreamed that the songs I would sing the songs I wrote at the Workers' Stadium, with thousands of people singing along, and that would be heartening and comforting for them. For me it would have been heart-warming. I really hoped this would happen, but I did not know I was a "migrant-worker poet". Then, after I came out with my poetry collection, I felt I was quite indifferent to these labels or codes. Fact is, we are workers, we're expressing our real feelings. Both in poetry and in fiction, as long as we are expressing our real feelings, we're not numb. I mean, we don't fully lose ourselves and be done with it. Recording these things is what gives literature its force, its vitality.<sup>46</sup>

In passing, it is interesting to point out that, in a short sentence which is actually very relevant to the debate around what can be considered workers' literature and a worker writer (see chapter Two). Xiao Hai, in a genuine effort to dodge ready-made formulas, has given his own answer: as

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<sup>46</sup> Interview on 26 October 2019.



long as the author is a worker themselves and is “expressing our real feelings,” in a combination of social identity and creative authenticity, what comes out is a real, strong and vibrant *workers’ literature*. Going back to the definition criteria established in the Introduction and chapters One and Two (*by, for, about*), it would seem that Xiao Hai definitely prioritises the *by*—i.e. authorship by workers themselves.

Xiao Hai’s earlier factory poetry appears more rare and dispersed, becoming more and more numerous and focused from 2015–16 onward. The factory, formerly in the background, gradually moves to the centre of the scene; simultaneously, the figure of other workers, originally referred to in the form of fellow youth grinded down by life, is progressively addressed starting from its position in production relations. Of course, this change is not so clear-cut as it may seem, as some characteristics of the later industrial poetry in earlier works. However, the influence of participation in PLC activities is visible. Xiao Hai’s factory poetry depicts the shopfloor in a vivid realist fashion, in both its internal space (assembly line, machines, colleagues, team leaders) and its external ramifications (dormitory, neighbourhood and surrounding spaces). While the observational realism that can be found in Xiao Hai’s urban poetry is evidently more unsalted and flatter at times, in his factory poetry it often flows into existential musings (stolen youth, dullness of life, etc.) or more abstract images. This is the case, for example, with “Xia yeban de gongren” 下夜班的工人 (Workers Off the Night Shift), a graphic picture of the scene awaiting workers who leave the factory after their night shift is over, full of food and clothes vendors. The poem imaginatively accompanies workers themselves on their “journey” out of the factory. It progresses from very concrete elements, like the “great door of the factory complex at a quarter past four” (四点一刻的厂区大门) of the first verse, zooming out to a more abstract setting—“under the resplendent Milky Way / in the glacial moonlight” (璀璨的星河下 / 冷幽的月色中), until the closure, where the

material silhouette of the worker crowd mixes up with a natural element of the scene: “the masked crowd rushes about / like snowfall in deep winter” (人群蒙面奔走 / 如一场深冬的雪).<sup>47</sup>

Xiao Hai also describes the factory as a labyrinth, or a Kafka-esque castle,<sup>48</sup> and workers live in this unescapable prison of repetitiveness, where “over and over, I can only take off and put on again / the clean workshop uniform from my homeland to a strange land” (我只能一次又一次的脱掉又穿上 / 从故乡到异乡的车间无尘衣).<sup>49</sup> This space, which is actually a social space in that it is characterised by a set of social relations even before it is a physical space, is totalising and completely permeates migrants’ lives themselves, being simultaneously the cause and destination of their journey. However, youth is the main victim of this prison, grinded down and emptied of meaning by the tedious rhythms of the factory, whose hands are increasingly unable to keep at pace with.<sup>50</sup> The bodily impact of elements directly belonging to the space and the activity of the factory is a vivid characteristic of the evolution of Xiao Hai’s factory poetry, as well as, at the same time, an interesting element of intertextuality, since it occurs frequently in migrant workers’ poetic imagery, and especially in Zheng Xiaoqiong and Xu Lizhi. With Zheng in particular, Xiao Hai also shares the vast use of technical terms associated with the assembly line, as well as some experimental attempts at list poetry.<sup>51</sup> Remaining on the terrain of intertextuality, the uniform, as pointed out by Zhang Huiyu while discussing the work of another migrant labourer poet, Tang

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<sup>47</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 231.

<sup>48</sup> Xiao Hai, “Wo zai chejian li,” 284.

<sup>49</sup> Xiao Hai, “Chejian haizi,” 66.

<sup>50</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 402.

<sup>51</sup> Xiao Hai has not written many list poems, but he has occasionally tried his hand at them. His postscripts to two of his most accomplished list poems, “Wo de qingchun jiniance” 我的青春纪念册 (The Album of My Youth) and “Yi ge beipiao de zibai” 一个北漂的自白 (Confessions of a Beijing Floater), locate them in 14 December and 23 December 2016 respectively, suggesting an interest in experimenting with the style in the same span of time (Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 396–397).

Yihong 唐以洪, symbolises the negation of any positive value historically associated with industrial production, and is therefore part of contemporary workers' identity crisis.<sup>52</sup> For sure, many of these elements (youth, loneliness, the lack of romance, realism) are not exclusive to Xiao Hai's factory poetry. We have already seen how they actually constitute the quintessence of his production in general. Nevertheless, I would argue that if they have become such distinctive traits of his poetry, that is rightly because he is a factory worker. Even when he does not write about the factory, still the factory haunts him. In many respects, these themes from his more general poetics find their finest expression in factory poetry. This leads us back to the question of what workers' poetry is, and to what extent an author's social identity leaves its stamp on their writing, even when it is apparently (*but only apparently*) neutral.

One of the most striking and relevant samples of Xiao Hai's industrial poetry is "Zhongguo gongren" 中国工人 (Chinese Workers), written in 2013. It won the poetry section of the First Labourers' Literature Prize in 2018, and its importance is mirrored by the fact that it is generally cited in online commentaries about the PLC or Xiao Hai personally. The title is also telling, especially if included in the extremely variegated and heterogeneous body of *dagong* poems that address what it means to be migrant workers today, with titles that directly refer to their social being, for example, "Dagongmei" 打工妹 (Female Migrant Worker) by Bai Lianchun, "Chuan gongzhuang de xiongdi" 穿工装的兄弟 (Brothers in Working Uniforms) by Shengzi, "Dagongzai" 打工仔 ([Male] Migrant Worker) by Xu Lizhi. The translation of the title is all but obvious, and forecasts a more general issue: while my preferred rendition is the plural "Chinese Workers," nothing prevents the translator from using the singular *Worker* in order to highlight the undeniable individuality strongly present in the poem. The poem is extremely complex and rich, and therefore it may be beneficial to discuss each stanza separately. Here follows the first:

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<sup>52</sup> Zhang Huiyu, "Literature as Medium."

我是一名中国工人

遍及世界的每个角落都有我们的革命同仁

也许是出于有意 也许是迫于无心

可我们都真真实实的坐在这里

用喂马劈柴的双手来周游世界的风云

I am a Chinese worker

every corner of the world is disseminated with our revolutionary companions

perhaps due to our intention perhaps forced to unwillingness

we all sit here decent and honest

with horse-feeding and wood-chopping hands we wander in the skies of the world

The first stanza introduces the poet as an individual person, although the borders of this subjectivity are soon transgressed, and individuality remains as the device that frames the section and keeps it together. Indeed, individuality appears only in the first verse, with the “I” and the singular “worker” (one might say that the adjective “Chinese” also points at individuality, and that is theoretically correct, but as a matter of fact the poem addresses *Chinese* workers, not *workers* in general), and in the last one, through the images of horse feeding, wood chopping and the skies of the world are directly taken from “Mianchao dahai, chun nuan hua kai” 面朝大海，春暖花开 (Facing the Sea, Blossoms of Spring), one of Haizi’s most famous (and last) poems, in an effort to give the work a recognisable poetic flavour (and authority). For the rest, at this very early stage the poem has already been pervaded by plurality, with the subject switched to “We.” The image of the “revolutionary companions” is an interesting one, lending itself to multiple readings. Zhang Huiyu interprets it as an ironic use of a typical trope of political lyricism, while in reality *made in China* products are the only thing that can be found everywhere in the world, following the end of China-

sponsored revolutionary internationalism.<sup>53</sup> Xiao Hai explains that he was referring to all Chinese workers, including also those living and working in other countries, an understanding that somewhat reflects the official policy of the Chinese state towards Chinese emigrants.<sup>54</sup>

The second and third stanzas continue in the same fashion:

我是一名中国工人

在钢筋水泥的欲望大楼里圈养为着我们的廉价青春春

夏秋冬的变迁不属于我们

粮食和蔬菜也不再需要我们关心

我们所能做的只是将 Made in China 的神秘字符疯狂流淌到四大洋和七大洲的每条河流与街道  
的中心

再用那十月革命后所带来的战利品来换取一张张年关将近时想要归家的票根

我是一名中国工人

任三点一线的日子在光阴的齿轮中爆裂翻滚

那漂洋过海的集装箱码头上装满了我们一无所有的瞬间追寻

内心的星火呼啸而来 暴雨入胸怀 大风吹不尽

于电闪雷鸣中我扪心自问 何时给自己一次生命的彻底狂奔

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>54</sup> Interview on 26 October 2019. Here follows Xiao Hai's own words, interesting also in their choice: "Back then I already mentioned the West, every corner of the world is disseminated with our revolutionary comrades, I meant to say us, the workers, all the Chinese living abroad" (那个时候我已经提到西方了, 遍及世界的角落都有我们的革命同志, 就是说我们这个工人呀, 很多中国的华人). Notice how he used the term "comrade" (同志) in the interview, but a more neutral "companion" (同仁) in the poem—Communist-sounding the first, Confucian-reminiscent the latter. As to the policy of the People's Republic towards the Chinese abroad, see De Giorgi, "United Front."

八千里太远 三千里太近

我们在这九百六十万平方公里的广袤土地上连夜生存

我来自农村 你来自乡镇 我们同在这繁华如梦的坚硬大都市里赤脚打拼

迎着第二次工业革命的枪声

我想给那大洋彼岸金发碧眼的雅皮们写封信

一封无处投递的信

I am a Chinese worker

in reinforced concrete skyscrapers of desire rearing our cheap youth

the passing of spring summer autumn winter does not belong to us

grains and vegetables no longer need our care

all we can do is to ravingly spread the mysterious sing of *Made in China* to the four oceans and into

every river and street centres of the seven continents

and then trade the spoils of the October Revolution for tickets back home every time the year

approaches its end

I am a Chinese worker

days spent working eating sleeping rotate bursting in the gears of time

the wharves of shipping containers gone across the sea are full of our dispossessed and fleeting search

the sparkles of the self come whistling storm enters the heart wind blows incessantly

in the midst of lightnings and thunders I wonder when did I let this one life of mine run amok

eight thousand *li* too far three thousand *li* too close

we exist in the night of this land of nine point six million square kilometres

I come from a village you come from a rural town we both strive barefoot in this hard city

burgeoning like a dream

welcoming the gunshots of the second industrial revolution

I wish to write a letter to those golden-haired and blue-eyed yuppies across the Pacific

a letter with no addressee

The relation between the individual and the collective is again at the centre of the stage, expressed both by diluting “I” into “We,” so that the boundaries between the two are more and more blurred, and through the usual *ni/wo* 你我—I/you formula. The latter is also present, for example, in “Tianxia dagong shi yi jia” 天下打工是一家 (All Migrant Workers Are One Family), the best-known slogan, catchphrase, and title of a song by the New Worker Arts Troupe. Here, talking about oneself appears tangled with talking about ourselves, although Xiao Hai does not do so with commonplace images or tried-and-tested language, but elaborating on his own preferred themes, with his usual heroic tunes: here we find again a youth subjugated by the market, and especially a sense of angst for the time that has been taken away, just like the product of workers’ labour, in a sort of re-signified, nationalised alienation. The same distress is felt for the abandonment of agriculture as well, both in its symbiotic relation with individuals who were born there, and possibly as the economic and symbolic mainstay of China. Furthermore, Xiao Hai exhibits also a not-so-veiled sense of guilty and responsibility for how his life has turned out to be; this element of “self-reproach” is omnipresent in Xiao Hai’s poetry, and can make us conclude, like van Crevel has, that he essentially “blames no one” for the hardships he has endured.<sup>55</sup>

Here, the figure of the revolution makes its second appearance following the “revolutionary companions.” The reference to the October Revolution and its “spoils” traded for the ticket to go back home, as most migrant workers do for Spring Festival, suggests an indictment at a monotonous, meaningless existence, dominated by gazes backwards instead of perspective. That becomes particularly poignant considering that the goal of the October Revolution was to establish workers’ power through the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that the following “revolutionary era,” including the Chinese revolution, can be considered an offshoot of the Russian October. That

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<sup>55</sup> Van Crevel, “I and We.”

today's workers cannot find any better use to the "spoils" of the October Revolution would suggest a failure of socialist policy. However, this may be a misunderstanding. As a matter of fact, as he revealed during our interviews, Xiao Hai wanted to build a connection with a long series of revolution associated with industry and with the creation of industrial workers as a social class. To him, this revolutionary cycle has been unable to fundamentally change the destinies of workers, and to give them back their right to youth.<sup>56</sup>

Spatially, the two stanzas go back and forth between an individual, localised dimension of workers (their homeplaces, the city where they "strive barefoot"), and the global arena where products travel (the oceans, the continents, the wharves), with China as a whole (curiously expressed through the size of its surface) in the middle. This is strongly remindful of a verse by Chi Moshu 池沫树: "Brush, brush brush brush, shoes made by us, China, / have set foot everywhere on the seven continents" (刷, 刷刷刷, 我们, 中国, 制造的鞋子 / 踏遍了七大洲).<sup>57</sup> Positioned in China, the poem imagines himself writing a letter to Western consumers, and this leads to the final stanza of the poem:

告诉他们春天的花朵有艳  
告诉他们空中的鸟儿飞多高  
告诉他们那地面上行走的人啊穿的看似有多体面  
嗨 真让我们羞惭  
我们在车间的温床上无地自容着恍然入眠  
不知怎么就毫无征兆的从梦中惊醒

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<sup>56</sup> During the interview on 26 October 2019, Xiao Hai admitted that he felt that "Zhongguo gongren" was not strong enough, perhaps also too old given his subsequent artistic evolution, and therefore in need of changes. He made this remarks precisely when going through this part of the poem.

<sup>57</sup> The poem, "Zuihou wangong" 最后完工 (Job Done at Last), is shown in the *Wo de shipian* film.



满怀的不解 钻心的疼痛

我更想要问问他们为何黎明的太阳布满了乌云

为何雨后的天空没有了彩虹

为何城市的夜晚灯如白昼

又为何曾浩浩荡荡的河流里如今却尽是金光闪闪或荒草丛生

那里长满了垒如长城的中国工人

长满了漫山遍野的中国工人

长满了手握青铜的中国工人

长满了吞云吐雾的中国工人

长满了铁甲铮铮的中国工人

长满了沉默如谜的中国工人

长满了中国工人

长满了中国工人

长满了中国工人

我是一名中国工人……

to tell them how colourful are flowers in spring

to tell them how high fly the birds in the sky

to tell them how much dignity, oh, people walking on that earth seem to have

ahi! I'm so ashamed

on the hotbed of workshops we fall asleep all of a sudden with nowhere to hide our faces

don't know why we wake from dreams without a sign

I even more want to ask them why the sun at dawn is covered in black clouds

why there's no rainbow any more in the sky after rain

why city nights are ablaze like in daylight  
and why rivers once mighty are now just glittering or invaded by weeds  
there grow Chinese workers built up like the Great Wall  
there grow Chinese workers all over mountains and planes  
there grow Chinese workers wielding bronze  
there grow Chinese workers swallowing clouds and mist  
there grow Chinese workers in clanging armours  
there grow Chinese workers silent like a riddle  
there grow Chinese workers  
there grow Chinese workers  
there grow Chinese workers

I am a Chinese worker...

The poem wraps up with this vaguely melancholic statement, forming a circularity with the first verse that encloses this sort of worker's epic, in what probably is one of Xiao Hai's most Ginsberg-esque moments, where we find history, frustration, alienation, individual and collective, and, last but not least, the explosive force of poetry. The last verses ("there grow...") are a manifesto of proletarian pride, advancing dignity and resilience as values per se, possibly able to put up an obstinate resistance to an oppressive world (and indeed poetry can, for Xiao Hai, "resist the world" [抵抗世界]). To be workers implies exile from the countryside, alienation from the fruit of labour, expulsion from history; but also a collective belonging, through which it is possible to get back into history itself.

A closest examination of the last verses is helpful to reveal the multiple layers of meaning in the aggrandising metaphors employed to characterise workers. Workers built up like the Great Wall (a similar image is also in China's national anthem, for example), wielding bronze and in clanging

armours give not only an idea of strength and toughness, but also of a firm rooting in national history. As pointed out by Zhang Huiyu, in Xiao Hai's poetry "individual fate escapes its mundane dimension and intersects with history,"<sup>58</sup> but through a positive identification of Chinese workers with the country's cultural tradition. The most compelling image is the final one—workers "silent as a riddle," which Xiao Hai attributes to his own feeling of being voiceless.<sup>59</sup> However, the poet is all but silent here. A worker poet writing, even writing about themselves being silent, is itself a break of cultural silence (and invisibility)—as well as an effort to solve the apparent riddle of the worker's social condition. And that is as true for Xiao Hai as it is for workers' poetry overall.

Yuppies are the most interesting characters in the poem. Their function in relation with Chinese workers is immediately clear. They epitomise the Western consumer, oblivious to the living origin of products in their hands, the Other to the dignity of labour depicted in the last verses. Criticism towards Euro-American consumerism cannot be defined as a defining trait of Xiao Hai's poetry, but it is undoubtedly a significant part of some important works of his. "Dang wo kan shijiebei de shihou wo kandao le shenme" 当我看世界杯的时候我看到了什么 (What I Saw While Watching the World Cup) records Xiao Hai's impressions while watching the World Cup in July 2018, and the "worker's gaze" focuses not on the game itself, but on the clothes worn by players of the opposing teams of Colombia and England, made by Chinese workers. The contrast between Chinese textile workers toiling their energy away in the "sweatshop of the world" and the upper-class consumers of their products (although Colombia can hardly be considered part of the "Global North," its football players undoubtedly form a the privileged stratum of society) returns here,

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<sup>58</sup> Zhang, "Literature as Medium."

<sup>59</sup> From our interview on 26 October 2019: "I had become silent. I was very angry when I wrote this" (我沉默了, 当时是很愤怒地写出来这个).

although, as underlined by van Crevel, in a more ironic and less verbose way than “Zhongguo gongren,” written five years earlier.<sup>60</sup> Here follows some of the early verses:

说实话我都不知道哥伦比亚  
在地球上的哪个位置  
而我知在东莞虎门的英格兰运动服装的工厂里  
我的工友一年四季都在白班夜班轮番着赶制球衣

to be honest I don't even know  
where is Colombia located on this earth  
but I know that in the England sporting outfit factory in Humen, Dongguan  
my workmates day and night four seasons a year toil to make those jerseys in time

While the contrast between Chinese workers and foreign consumers is much more nuanced in this case, this opposition nevertheless takes purely national colours—the dispossessed South versus the capitalist North; Chinese producers versus Western consumers; Chinese exploited versus Western exploiters. Class struggle is moved onto the international plane, apparently hiding social disparities within China itself and identifying the exploiting class in the imaginary totality of the “West.” However, one should also keep into account Xiao Hai’s frustration when writing these poems, as well as the fact that he is not oblivious to such “domestic” issues, especially in his later production. It is therefore more interesting to examine what can be seen in the gaps of meaning, for what comes out, at the end of the day, is a statement of socio-cultural existence of contemporary workers, and an indictment at inequality as a structural reality on a global as well as local scale.

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<sup>60</sup> Van Crevel, “I and We.”

Furthermore, as Xiao Hai's industrial poetry develops, its verses increasingly convey a sense of betrayed industrial promise and transmit the fluidity of the modern mobile worker as opposed to their existential paralysis. These verses are full of (self-)destruction and abandonment, instead of the sacrifice and pride that can be found both in other migrant worker poets more influenced by the socialist tradition (as will be the case of Xu Liangyuan in the next chapter) and some of his own earlier poems. A sample of this change can be found in Xiao Hai's 2018 poem "Chejian haizi" 车间孩子 (Children of the Workshop), precisely in how the poet addresses the factory directly: "ah, workshop!, why do I hear sisters crying silently in your bosom?" (车间啊我怎么听到有姐妹在你的宽广怀抱里默然哭泣). This is followed, a few verses later, by another question: "look up to the sky gaze down to the earth, again I pat my chest again no answer / ah, factory!, why do I see brothers self-destruct under your high soles?" (看看天空瞧瞧大地再拍拍胸膛依然没有一个答案 / 工厂啊我为何看到又兄弟在你高大的脚底下毁灭自己).<sup>61</sup> A double shift occurs here: firstly, the factory is no longer the object of a realist observation or humanist critique, but fully becomes the expression and anthropomorphic embodiment of labour exploitation, determined by nothing else than production relations. Secondly (and as a result), Xiao Hai's "mature" factory poetry no longer addresses Western consumers as counterparts, the way "Zhongguo gongren" did, but the workshop itself, which becomes the indifferent, unresponsive recipient of Xiao Hai's questions.

While these questions give the idea of a reality not easily discernible, Xiao Hai advances some disturbing interpretations of it. Particularly poignant in this respect are the following verses from "Zhongguo zhizao" 中国制造 (Made in China), written in 2019:

我们制造了收音机 电脑 手机显示屏 苹果7

我们制造了耐克 彪马 英格兰运动服 阿迪达斯

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<sup>61</sup> Xiao Hai, "Chejian haizi," 67.

我们焊机版 插电阻 打螺丝 安装马达保护器

我们做袖口 装拉链 上领子 把羽绒服里外都对齐

我们和机器做朋友与产品谈恋爱

(...)

流水线不但制造了产品

也制造了我们一成不变的青年生活

(...)

一批又一批的少男少女们啊

也成了独特的中国制造

we have made radio sets computers phone displays Apple 7

we have made Nike Puma England sporting outfit Adidas

we weld plates plug electric resistors tighten screws set up motor protection

we make cuffs install zippers raise collars adjust puffer coats in and out

we make friends with machines and flirt with products

[...]

the assembly line makes not only products

it has made also our immutable young life

[...]

ah, one batch of young men and women after another

have become special *Made in China* products, too<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Xiao Hai, "Zhongguo zhizao," 252.

Distant and cold, the poem is extremely concrete in its referents and objects (chiefly through the technical language and the brands in the first stanza), and we have seen how this is not always present in Xiao Hai, adept at more abstract representations. It must be pointed out, though, that such concreteness is also not unusual in his recent production. Given these factors, “Zhongguo zhizao” is actually closer to iconic examples of migrant workers’ poetry than most of Xiao Hai’s factory poetry. Again, there is a particular connection to Zheng Xiaoqiong, not only due to the abundance of the specific industrial vocabulary, but above all through the “fantasies of a thorough transfiguration, or an undoing, of the human subject,” to follow Jaguścik.<sup>63</sup>

Dehumanisation is truly at its fullest in “Zhongguo zhizao,” offering Xiao Hai’s version of the metamorphosis of worker and product, another trope of migrant workers’ poetry at large, with the machine as a synecdoche for wage labour.<sup>64</sup> What is lost here, as far as Xiao Hai’s poetics is concerned, is the idea of the young creative self as a stronghold against the maladies of the world. Youth now is reduced to a mere commodity, graphically depicting the labour-process described by Marx as the incorporation of labour (and the labourer, in Xiao Hai’s verses) with its product.<sup>65</sup> If it is true that Xiao Hai finds no one, if not impersonal fate, to blame for his ordeals, it is likewise notable that, especially in his later production, the emphasis he puts on material processes of exploitation do suggest a more concrete, material direction, and an awareness of the worker’s position as a social subject in the production relations in force in society. In the gradual shift from an individual perspective to a more marked awareness of the collective dimension of wage exploitation, Xiao Hai’s industrial poetry also reveals signs of class consciousness. In this sense,

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<sup>63</sup> Jaguścik, “Intersection of Gender, Class and Environmental Concern,” 249.

<sup>64</sup> In English-language scholarship, the bodily implications of this metamorphosis have been analysed, in particular, by Sorace (“Poetry after the Future”). Van Crevel follows a similar thread in his dedicated study on Xu Lizhi (“Misfit”).

<sup>65</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 201.

poetry is there to testify to the possibility for the subaltern not only to speak, but also to interpret the world.

#### 5.4. Urban poetry

The city is the background and setting of a large portion of Xiao Hai's production. In his life-story, the cities he moved to one after another, namely Shenzhen, Suzhou, Shanghai, Changshu, Zhengzhou and Beijing, essentially carry the same symbolic significance as the several workplaces he kept changing, embodying precarity and instability. That is also one reason why the city is implicit or tacitly alluded to also in poems not directly addressing it. However, I will single out as *urban poetry* those works where the city assumes an inner value, becomes structurally part of the text as metaphor, image, or instrumental architectural element whose engagement allows the poem to produce a certain effect, either directly or through other figurative intermediaries.

Urban literature is not an uncharted territory in Chinese literary scholarship. Several studies, including Gao Xiuqin's 高秀芹 book *Wenxue de Zhongguo chengxiang* 文学的中国城乡 (*The Chinese Country and City in Literature*), Visser's seminal *Cities Surround the Countryside* and Yiran Zheng's *Writing Beijing*, single out the contemporary city in cultural representation as the epitome for the tremendous transformation of Chinese society since the early 20th century, the hotbed of new social and cultural practices (individualisation and globalisation above all), and a privileged battleground between tradition and modernity. The domain of urban poetry, by contrast, has been far less explored. A long and very heterogeneous discussion involving a range of theoretical questions (such as genre) has been taking place in Chinese-language scholarship to come out with a definition of the concept, that can be roughly summarised by resorting to Yang Jianlong's 杨剑龙 words: urban poetry "reflects the aesthetic conception of modern civilisation in the urban context, describes and portrays modern people's psychological condition, thought,



sentiments and working life, as well as the poet's peculiar experience of urban life" (反映城市背景下现代文明的审美观念, 描绘和刻画现代人的心理状态、思想情感、工作生活以及诗人对城市生活的独特感受).<sup>66</sup> Of course, this could be true for absolutely any type of cultural production that takes place in the city, is authored by a person living in the city, or refers to the city. For this reason, urban poetry should not only reflect urban life, but also (and perhaps especially) "construct a poetic space of the city" (营造一道城市的诗意空间), as underlined by Zhai Yueqin 翟月琴.<sup>67</sup> In other words, urban poetry includes a body of artworks more explicitly addressing the issue of "poetic dwelling"—an attempt at using poetry to live (by making sense of) a space in its social fragmentation from a condition of existential homelessness, that in the case of a migrant labourer becomes also extremely material.<sup>68</sup> From the perspective of spatial representation, urban poetry, together with its rural counterpart (but to a lesser extent with respect to it), can be reconnected to a tradition stemming from landscape poetry (*shanshui shi* 山水诗), which tended to focus on poets' material and emotional attachment to places, as well as their metaphorical functions in connection with history and philosophy.<sup>69</sup> In passing, here we may note that the city appears in many studies on migrant-worker literature, but close to no studies on urban literature "in general," "at-large," include migrant worker authors. Whatever the reason, this is a serious shortcoming, especially considering that literary production by migrant workers can offer novel perspectives to look at genres. Liu Dongwu, for example, writes of *dagong* poet Zhang Shaomin 张绍民 as a "post-nativist" (*hou xiangtu* 后乡土) author, since his "rural writing" is influenced by the pervasiveness of urban

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<sup>66</sup> Yang Jianlong, "Lun chengshihua jincheng," 77.

<sup>67</sup> Zhai Yueqin, "Shiyu yu fasheng," 42.

<sup>68</sup> Shemtov, "Poetry and Dwelling."

<sup>69</sup> Xiao-Lun Wang, "Geography and Chinese Poetry."

models, practices and imagination, in a reading that brings him close to Lefebvre's "urban revolution" (the urban as a mode of society and production).<sup>70</sup>

The city assumes yet more implications when it comes to migrant workers and their poetry. For migrants, the city is both the destination of their journey (therefore also an object of desire), the embodiment of their conditions of displacement (including the administrative discrimination caused by the *hukou* system), but also a product of the labour of some of them (and them collectively as a class), as several migrants are employed in the construction sector. Xiao Hai's urban poetry fits the idea of poetic dwelling, as it seems to function like a compass used by the author to navigate the strange land of the city. "Dang gudu zaici xilai" 当孤独再次袭来 (When Solitude Strikes Again), a poem written shortly after his arrival to Beijing, contains precisely the idea to use poetry (actually, "a verse from the *Shijing*"; 用诗经里的一句话) to "decipher" (解释) what is going on in the city.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, Xiao Hai's urban poems frequently see the author precisely located in the city, with definite topographic elements employed to clearly express this location. Such elements include name-places, like streets (some poems indeed take the reader on a journey, going straight, taking turns, etc.), squares, bus and subway stations, or also skyscrapers, neighbourhoods, and so forth. On the one hand, this gives full play to the possible role of literature "as a map to make sense and orient ourselves in the world of social relations."<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, precisely by navigating the material space of the city, poetry does not limit itself to giving a geographical account of it, but instead creates its own poetic space, primarily by assigning symbolic functions to real places, contexts, people, phenomena and events, and these functions come exclusively from the poet's sensibility (itself nurtured by his social being). This poetic space is therefore juxtaposed to material space, both crossed, informed and webbed together by existing social relations. As Ross points out in her

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<sup>70</sup> Liu, "Juda de chengshi," Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution*.

<sup>71</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 339.

<sup>72</sup> Tally, *Spatiality*, 2.

pivotal inquiry on Rimbaud and social space, poetry can allow us “to conceive of space *not* as a static reality but as active, generative, to experience space as created by an interaction, as something that our bodies reactivate, and that through this reactivation, in turn modifies and transforms us.”<sup>73</sup>

“Weicheng zhixia” 围城之下 (Under the Besieged Fortress—no relation to Qian Zhongsu’s 钱钟书 novel), written in 2017, is a perfect sample of it:

西直门的车一路向前  
敲响了大钟寺的后门  
知春路我也不知道  
困在了积水潭  
我跟着拥挤的人群排着队  
想要去到那五道口  
五道口有个工人俱乐部  
今晚要放一部电影  
这部电影走过崎岖的路  
名字就叫我的诗篇

从什刹海一直往北开  
北土城海睡过了站  
牡丹园里梦牡丹  
我想起了杨玉环  
可过苏州街上没老朋友  
就迷失在公主坟

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<sup>73</sup> Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space*, 35.

公主坟的人儿很多  
你有没有听到谁在哭  
人们争抢着去团结湖  
想占最有一个王位

the Xizhimen bus goes straight  
ringing the backdoor of the Great Bell Temple  
Zhichunlu, what do I know  
tire myself out at Jishuitan  
I queue up following the crowd  
I wish to go to Wudaokou  
in Wudaokou there's a worker club  
tonight they're screening a film  
a film that has travelled on rugged roads  
title is *Wo de shipian*

straight north from Shichahai  
I sleep through Beitucheng  
I dream of peonies at Mudanyuan [Peony Park]  
Yang Yuhuan comes to my mind  
but no old friends past Suzhou Road  
and I get lost at Gongzhufen [Princess' Tomb]  
there's a lot of people at Gongzhufen  
have you heard someone's crying?  
people scramble to get to Tuanjiehu  
wishing to occupy the last throne<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Xiao Hai, "Weicheng zhixia," 43.

Language is unadorned and the whole structure is quite bare, if we exclude an interesting syntactic opposition in the first four and then sixth and seventh verses (the alternate position of name-places are at the beginning and at the end of the verses aesthetically creates a contrast), and the juxtaposition of city and nature with the poet dreaming of peonies as he passes by Mudanyuan. But these features can hardly be considered as defining of the whole poem. What is structural here is a mapping operation of the city, with direct references to specific topographic elements giving not only an account of Xiao Hai's material trip to get to his destination, but also articulating the progression of the poem itself. The stations whose names fill the poem seem to exercise the same function that Lu Zhen 卢桢, in his thorough study of imagery in urban poetry, attributes to streets for the "guest" poet (and no metaphor is more fitting for the migrant labourer than that of a guest in the city, an image present also in the New Yorkers' Art Troupe's repertoire), i.e. that of connecting the dots of the city and making sense of its logics, by "turning the street experience into an 'inner room'-like experience of mind, undertaking a spiritual wandering out of a secret inner domain" (将街道经验转化为思想的“室内”经验, 在隐秘的自我领地展开精神漫游).<sup>75</sup> The trip is studded with perceptions, like sleep (boredom), dreams (escape from the everyday), and a person crying unheard in the midst of the crowd which breaks the otherwise relentlessly fast pace of the poem, itself clearly in reflection of the fast rhythm of life. The presence of Yang Yuhuan 杨玉环 (better known as Yang Guifei 杨贵妃), the *femme fatale*-like figure allegedly behind the An Lushan 安禄山 Rebellion in the eight century, seems more the fruit of a personal association between the legendary princess *par excellence* and the imagination of Beijing as a timeless imperial centre (also considering that the capital of the Tang empire, where Yang Guifei lived, was Chang'an). *Wo de shipian* is more compelling, both in its metatextual significance as one of the symbols of worker

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<sup>75</sup> Lu Zhen, "Zhongguo dangdai dushi shixue," 112.

literature, and in its textual function as the reason behind Xiao Hai's physical and poetic journey; the rugged roads travelled by the film can be read as a metaphor for the rugged roads of the poet's migration.

Trips through the city are a trope in Xiao Hai's poetry, accompanied by recurring elements such as roads, bridges (Jianguomen above all, with its night vista over glimmering buildings and the lights of traffic), neon lights, skyscrapers. Along these elements, the poetic city is populated by a gallery of characters (a mix of urbanites and migrants) and objects, each endowed with certain characteristics or asked to perform a metaphoric role. This attribution of distinctive qualities or traits at times has the function to create a contrast between the poet's inner self and the outer reality of the city, and implicitly, a contrast between social expectations from an individual in the consumer city and the poet's failure to conform. So, for example, in "2015nian 4yue 1ri de 21dian ban" 2015年4月1日的21点半 (Half Past 21 of the 1st of April 2015), a poem quite precisely located also in time (although written in Changshu and not in Beijing), the poet appears unable to fit in the urban surrounding of cars and people, since "no [car or bus] can carry me" (没有一辆能够载我而去) and "no one is willing to point me a direction" (没有人愿意给我指出个方向). Reality is questioned altogether by employing urban elements unable to obtain the result it would realistically be expected from them: no red flag flies over Red Flag Bridge, no bus gets to the station (quite Godotian), and the moon leaves no shadow (therefore leaving no shadowy companion to the solitary poet like it would in Li Bai's imagination).<sup>76</sup> Urban elements are similarly employed in "Di'anmenwai kuangxiangqu" 地安门外狂想曲 (Di'anmenwai Rhapsody; we are in Beijing again):

在九月星期四的晚上

我走在地安门外大街的街道

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<sup>76</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 180.

路旁的小贩儿贩卖着廉价的梦想  
身旁匆匆的过客一边徘徊一边张望  
十块钱画一张自画像能否画出我的悲伤  
酒吧卖唱的歌手啊你能否唱出我秋天的希望  
在地安门前不要说思念  
思念的人儿啊早已肝肠寸断  
在地安门前不要谈理想  
你不知道理想醉倒在那边关明月的大漠上

沉默了近一百年的钟鼓楼  
能否告诉我现在到了什么时候  
突然的风吹乱了我脚步的节奏  
我知道你的城墙很厚很厚  
后海的夕阳已经坠落在后海里头  
前门儿的星星啊能否拂去我今夜的哀愁  
在地安门前不要说思念  
思念的人儿啊早已肝肠寸断  
在地安门前不要谈理想  
你不知道理想醉倒在那边关明月的大漠上

on a September Thursday evening  
I'm walking down Di'anmenwai Avenue  
peddlers along the road are selling low-priced dreams  
guests hurrying by hesitate while taking a look  
ten *kuai* to paint a self-portrait, can it paint out my sorrow?

hey, singers for a living in bars, can you sing out my autumn hopes?  
in front of Di'anmen one must not talk of yearning  
people who yearn have long been heartbroken  
in front of Di'anmen one must not talk of dreams  
don't you know that dreams have fallen drunk in that great desert shutting down the moon?

Bell and Drum Towers, silent for almost one century  
can you tell me at what time I've arrived now?  
a sudden wind ruffles the rhythm of my steps  
I know your walls are thick, so thick  
the sunset of Houhai has fallen into the lake  
oh, stars of Qianmen, can you dispel tonight's grief of mine?  
in front of Di'anmen one must not talk of yearning  
people who yearn have long been heartbroken  
in front of Di'anmen one must not talk of dreams  
don't you know that dreams have fallen drunk in that great desert shutting down the moon?<sup>77</sup>

This one is also articulated along topographic elements (Di'anmen, Houhai), cultural landmarks (Bell and Drum Towers, Qianmen), and the "people of the street," namely the street vendors and singers in bar. The desert evokes an image diametrically opposed to the prosperous urban landscape otherwise used by Xiao Hai himself to describe Beijing, while the repetition of the last two verses of each stanza, functional to give coherence to the poem, still bears the influence of the author's earlier "musical" poetry. Here is a synthesis of Xiao Hai's artistic interests, in that we find introspection, evoked also by relics of the past interrogated about the present, coupled with a nuanced social commentary in street vendors, possibly a synecdoche for migrant labourers, whose

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<sup>77</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 355.



dreams are not only sold (and therefore degraded, vulgarised), but also cheap, just like migrant workers' youth is sold away together with their low-priced labour-force.

Topography, then, is there not only to make sense of space and place, by textually reconstructing the map of the city. In fact, topographic elements are also personalised and interrogated, and while the real city forces the poet to adapt to its social rule, the poetic city can be fully adapted to the poet's desires. This way, the city enters in a dialogue with the author's inner self, aesthetically expressed through his feelings, sentiments and perceptions. Thus, other than through its material arteries, Beijing is experienced also as a metropolis made of unequally-distributed dreams, craze, separation, abandonment, a city that intoxicates of lights, human activity, desire, illusion, especially in the inebriating night. The train station even appears as a social space frozen in time, with Xiao Hai going there on the look for his former self when he had just arrived to Beijing.<sup>78</sup> Topographic mapping becomes cognitive mapping, an eminently urban process theorised by Jameson, who associates it with "disalienation," in that it "involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory."<sup>79</sup> Indeed, while Xiao Hai seems intent on reappropriating the unfamiliar urban totality, his poetic space is never exactly mimetic.

The city is well present in the production of most migrant worker authors, including those from the PLC, but such "cartographic" attention is definitely a feature of Xiao Hai's. One outstanding example of a very different approach to city poetry from the group itself (and, as a matter of fact, from what is normally read in migrant-worker poetry as well) is Guo Fulai 郭福来. Formerly a farmer, he left his native Hebei relatively late, in his 40s, and moved to Beijing to take up a job as welder. He learned about the literature group while visiting the Picun museum to borrow a dictionary. A prolific poet, but especially appreciated for his prose and short stories, Guo is

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<sup>78</sup> This image occurs in "Mengxiang zhi du" 梦想之都 (City of Dreams; *Gongchang de haojiao*, 358–359).

<sup>79</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 51.

explicit about his plain love for writing in itself,<sup>80</sup> that he performs in a strongly lyrical and, at times, quasi-dramatic way. This attention to the “instrument” itself (writing) transpires also from his most socially-committed production. While Xiao Hai navigates the city with the “compass” of poetry, Guo Fulai employs the same tool to inscribe his presence in the urban space. The city is indicted by him for forgetting about migrant workers’ essential contribution to the making of its prosperity, or, in Marxian terms, for alienating them from their labour. Guo’s creative act is to remind the city that the presence of labourers is virtually everywhere, metonymically expressed through poetry itself:

每一块砖都是勤劳的文字

我们用瓦刀做笔

一块块，一层层，一面面

都仔细地垒砌妥当

一面墙是一首优美的小诗

一座楼就是一篇华丽的辞章

every brick is a word of our labour

of spackle knives we make our pens

piece after piece, layer after layer, wall after wall

carefully we place each brick in its place

a wall is an elegant short poem

a building is a gorgeous work of literature<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Guo, “Wei shenme xieshi,” 177.

<sup>81</sup> Guo, “Dagongzhe de shiyi shenghuo.” The 117-verse poem is one of the longest written by Guo Fulai. It alternates between markedly lyrical passages, like the one cited above, and more (self-)ethnographic parts plainly describing migrants’ living conditions, occasionally interspersed with political-lyricist-sounding tropes.

Xiao Hai's urban poetry does not overlook the collective side of the coin, that is to say, the objective condition of marginalisation experienced by migrant workers like himself. Nevertheless, he does not touch upon other elements normally found in the work of migrant labourers, the residence permit above all (and Liu Dongwu's authorial incarnation is particularly prolific in this respect). Inequality is there in Xiao Hai, but comes out differently—again, geographically, or at least spatially. Beijing's typical "ring" beltways, for example, become metaphors for unequal access to the city, suggesting that they enclose and separate different layers of social space. "People from ring to ring make dreams from ring to ring / houses from ring to ring are different from ring to ring" (一环一环的人啊做着一环一环的梦 / 一环一环的房是一环一环的不同), he writes, just a few lines after saying that "regardless whether we are in factories restaurants or rushing runners / it's like a slide of glass divided us from this city" (无论我们是工厂餐厅或者是跑快递 / 我们跟这个城市仿佛总隔着一层玻璃).<sup>82</sup> Physical distance translates into social distance, exemplified by the contrast between the glorious lights of downtown and the dull grey of periphery roads going to the *chengzhongcun*, the glass window separating "common-sense" Beijing from "another Beijing," which is actually "the whole landscape in my northern drifter's life" (我北漂生活的全部风景).<sup>83</sup>

Clearly, however, what Xiao Hai wishes to convey more of his northern drifter's life is rather his own sense of estrangement and solitude. This is actually coherent both with his more general poetic intention, strongly defined by subjectivity and individuality, and with his own poetic topography of the city—no one needs a map more than a lonely traveller who has lost their way. "Chengshi yiyuzheng" 城市抑郁症 (City Depression) is particularly telling in this regard. The poet imagines himself wandering around at night, alone, wondering on what roads (the road again) he will finally meet love. This pattern repeats over three stanzas, accompanied by typical tropes of

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<sup>82</sup> Xiao Hai, "Huan shuo Beijing," 67–68.

<sup>83</sup> Xiao Hai, "Ling yi ge Beijing," 259.

Xiao Hai's poetry, including existential alienation, withering youth and collapsed (坍塌) dreams, slightly changing in the third stanza, when the poet longs after exciting dreams and somewhat regenerating pain, before a grim end:

你如同一颗孤独燃烧的流星  
寂寥的划过人潮的汹涌  
痛楚忧伤挣扎和崩溃凝聚成了  
这漫长如谜且无可救药的城市抑郁症

like a lonely burning meteor  
you dart across turbulent streams of people  
struggle with anguish and grief and then coalesce into  
this city depression endless as a riddle and forever incurable<sup>84</sup>

It may be argued that this fatal, hopeless loneliness is exclusively his, a product of his character, the result of his own frustration at unattainable love that informs the whole arc of his poetic creation, or again of the dizziness he feels in the grand city (which can also be another interpretation of his cognitive mapping operation). However, if this individual feeling is seen contextually with the other objective condition of inequality that emerge from other samples of Xiao Hai's urban poetry, it becomes collective, too—and the result not only of personal characteristics, but also of the objective inability to access urban sociality.

Xiao Hai has found an alternative to this solitude in Picun. The village is present in his urban production, of course, ranging from the bombastic, “militant,” monotonous pattern commonly found in works of literature group members with Picun itself as a them (introduced in chapter

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<sup>84</sup> Xiao Hai, “Chengshi yiyuzheng,” 85–86.

Three), to more aesthetically convincing creations, with a stronger attention to form and metaphor. Generally, his poetic production referring explicitly to Picun as a concrete area tends more towards realist observation than introspective contemplation, and it is characterised by an impetuous intrusion of “We,” which is otherwise less present in Xiao Hai’s urban poetry than it is, for example, in his factory poetry. What gathers in Picun is an assembly of lonely bodies, bound to the “urban” Xiao Hai by their shared status as solitary wanderers in the city. For them, the very existence of the shared space of Picun becomes an opportunity for human solidarity, but, it would seem, yet not a cure for the “incurable” city depression. Finally, it is relevant to note that migrant-worker authors—the guests in the “city of others”—display a remarkable ability to interrogate the city to such an extent, not limiting themselves to a critique of objective conditions of inequality and social injustice, but carving down to its deepest cultural meaning. If the city is a social space, and if social space is truly characterised, as suggested by Bourdieu, by a “coexistence of points of view,”<sup>85</sup> migrant workers’ perspective has indeed something to add to our understanding of urban complexity and its interaction with literature.

### **5.5. Transcultural intertextuality as poetic identity construction**

Xiao Hai’s poetry is a dialogic patchwork. It is packed with intertextual references to other works, which take the shape of citations or outright rewritings. We have already seen some cases in the interpretation of factory and urban poetry, most prominently Haizi’s line in “Zhongguo gongren.” This stems from Xiao Hai’s intention to actively engage with his role models, but it is also part of his performative understanding of poetry (as described above). The choice of authors to cite or rewrite is indeed an interesting topic, and is motivated by a mixture of biographical elements and

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<sup>85</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 183.

more specifically literary ones to create his poetic persona.<sup>86</sup> While intertextual citations or explicit references to other writers, poets or singers can be found across the whole arc of Xiao Hai's *oeuvre*, the majority of rewritings can be found in *Gongchang de haojiao*, which covers the years from 2008 to early 2017—and the title itself, as already pointed out, intentionally echoes Ginsberg's "Howl." Here, rewritings are usually poems that maintain the structure, sometimes the title, often the images or mood, of a previous work, converting them to the message Xiao Hai wished to convey, and can be interpreted not only inspirational starting points, but also and mostly as tributes to the source authors. Rewritten authors include Leonard Cohen, Cui Jian 崔健, Bob Dylan, Haizi, John Lennon, Wang Feng, The Rolling Stones. Besides the choice of authors, an analysis of which elements are preserved and which are sacrificed, what meanings are extracted from the source texts and what new meanings are inserted in the rewritings, can be useful to understand the nature of Xiao Hai's operations.

Of course, Haizi deserves the foremost place in any survey of Xiao Hai's inspirations and intertextual references. To Xiao Hai, he is muse, hero, role model, and therefore the object of various tributes in verse. These tributes can be summarily divided into three categories. First, some poems are directly dedicated to Haizi, or to elements connected with his life, and, above all, death (trains, Shanhaiguan, where he killed himself). These works make explicit Xiao Hai's perceived and sought-after connection with Haizi, both spiritual and poetic, as it emerges from his 2012 poem "Zhangzhe luosaihuzi de gege Haizi" 长着络腮胡子的哥哥 海子 (My Bearded Brother Haizi), whose first stanza is worth quoting:

长着络腮胡子的哥哥 海子

你走了 你走了

但你却从未远去

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<sup>86</sup> Van Crevel, "I and We."

你是诗歌的父亲  
我知道你有两个孩子 一个叫太阳 一个叫月亮  
你是大地的儿子  
我知道你从不乏情人  
所有的野花和麦田都是你的姑娘  
在每一个葱郁的季节里  
她们都与你一起芬芳

my bearded brother Haizi  
you are gone, you are gone  
but you've never gone far  
you are the father of poetry  
I know you have two children  
one is called sun the other is called moon  
you are the son of the great land  
I know you are never devoid of love  
all the wild flowers and wheat fields are your women  
and in every verdant season  
they become fragrant with you<sup>87</sup>

This is but one example of what Xiao Hai means by poetic homage to his idol, particularly evident when he refers to him as the “father of poetry” and to the sun and moon (two frequent tropes of his) as his children, and then connects with the spiritual link that jointed Haizi to the country and the land itself, particularly by summoning his trademark wheat. The power of poetry runs through the verses, sprinkled with grandiloquent words (we also find “eternal youth” 永远的青

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<sup>87</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 32.

春, “perpetual force” 永恒的力量),<sup>88</sup> leaving it implicit that the art gloriously grows in association with nature in the verdant seasons. While the re-enactment of these tropes and imagery is important, even more it is the forging by Xiao Hai of an affective (*cum* literary) connection with Haizi: he is the father of poetry, but *his* bearded brother. To wit, Xiao Hai is not only tributing his utmost admiration to his predecessor, but is also asserting his own participation in a sort of sacred brotherhood of poets-errant—a poetic *jianghu* 江湖.<sup>89</sup>

A second type of homage occurs with Xiao Hai’s citation of Haizi’s most distinctive tropes. Such surreptitious, less-explicit references equally contribute to impregnating Xiao Hai’s poetry with the presence of his “bearded brother”, even when it is hidden or not immediately evident. A case in this direction is Vincent van Gogh, to whom Xiao Hai dedicates a poem, and who is famously the protagonist of one of Haizi’s earliest writings, “A’er de taiyang” 阿尔的太阳 (The Sun of Arles), where the famous painter is interestingly referred to as “red-haired brother” (红头发的哥哥),<sup>90</sup> similar to how Xiao Hai calls Haizi his “bearded brother.”

And finally, we have rewritings. The most compelling example is “Huanghe” 黄河 (Yellow River), a mirroring rewriting of “Yazhou tong” 亚洲铜 (Asia Bronze), Haizi’s “programmatic poem”<sup>91</sup> for what concerns his mythopoetic intent. With the source text, the rewriting shares not only the general message, focused on national ancestry and cultural roots, but also the structure, down to the most minute details, as showed by the following excerpt:

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, 33.

<sup>89</sup> Speaking of *jianghu* in contemporary poetry, one must point to van Crevel’s witty essay *Walk on the Wild Side*. My understanding, though, is that my (fleeting) mention of *jianghu* as a spiritual-affective bound here is not exactly the same as the “wild side” of poetry in van Crevel’s argument.

<sup>90</sup> Haizi, *Haizi shi*, 5.

<sup>91</sup> Van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry*, 113.



黄河 黄河

推动磨盘之前

我们把光明深处固执歌唱的灵魂叫做太阳

而这太阳主要由你构成

Yellow River Yellow River

before pushing the millstone

we'll call our souls that persist in singing in the bright depths, we'll call them sun

but this sun is primarily composed of you<sup>92</sup>

And here comes the same passage from the source text, “Yazhou tong”:

亚洲铜 亚洲铜

击鼓之后

我们把在黑暗中跳舞的心脏叫做月亮

这月亮主要由你构成

Asia Bronze Asia Bronze

after beating the drums

we'll call our hearts dancing in the dark, we'll call them moon

this moon that is primarily composed of you<sup>93</sup>

The architecture is specular, minus some minimal discrepancies, but images are semantically inverted, like in a mirror. This is done for the whole poem, playing on antonyms and contrasts,

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<sup>92</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 214.

<sup>93</sup> Haizi, *Haizi shi*, 3.

often in a very elegant way, also working on grammatical and lexical details, like in the following examples, respectively from “Huanghe” and “Yazhou tong”:

让我们和略显笨拙的**陶器**一起 **装下**它吧

let us **hold it in** together with the clumsy **pottery**

让我们——我们和**河流**一起 **穿上**它吧

let us—let us **wear it on** together with the **river**

Here, clearly, the river flow in the source text is changed into pottery, to maintain the contrast with the river in the title “Huanghe,” which is instead reflected into the original. Furthermore, the resultative complements in the Chinese verbs at the end are likewise reversed, something that unfortunately tends to get lost in translation.<sup>94</sup> On the one hand, this is a playful stylistic exercise, but on the other, it is yet one more creative form taken by Xiao Hai’s endeavour to inscribe himself into poetry by inscribing Haizi—not his alter-ego, but more his ideal ego—in his own verses. The Huanghe in particular is chosen out of its national-cultural relevance, as appropriate as the “Asian bronze” in providing a symbol for a “Chinese ancestry.”

A critical review and reconstruction of literary past was a core endeavour of Obscure poets as well. According to Pozzana, however, such an endeavour was not a simple reorganisation of the history of literature “to include their own portrait, decorated with coats of arms of illustrious ancestors.” On the contrary, “Creating one’s own tradition literally means a retroaction of the

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<sup>94</sup> I have tried to give an idea of the contrast in translation with the use of different phrasal verbs.

present on the past, in favour of the infinity of poetic subjectivities.”<sup>95</sup> These fundamental questions resonate with Xiao Hai and his attempt to create his own “genealogy of poets.”<sup>96</sup> It is not surprising that such an active invention of personal literary past would end up gravitating around Haizi, thus reconnecting to a romantic vision of selfless artistic martyrdom as the zenith of poethood. Haizi pops up (with Eliot, Höderlin and Yesenin) also in the personal genealogy elaborated by Guo Jinniu.<sup>97</sup> For him, this is seemingly a declaration of poetic inspiration, especially given his strong attention to themes such as homesickness and return. Conversely, Xiao Hai’s evocation of Haizi appears more consistent with his personal “cult of poetry” sustained by the “thanatography” built around Haizi, an approach that, as pointed out by van Crevel in his thorough discussion of the concept, is definitely successful in mythising the poet’s figure.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the thanatographical idea of “self-determination by self-destruction”<sup>99</sup> can be spotted also, with obvious differences, in Xiao Hai’s “negative identity,” where the active acceptance of one’s non-conformity leads to the construction of a peculiar individuality.

Bob Dylan’s inclusion in this personal pantheon is less easily explainable. Although he was able to publicly perform in China for the first time only in 2011, Dylan has been known in the Chinese rock music scene through cassette tapes for decades, influencing local artists as well. Xiao Hai shares his affective and artistic connection with the songwriter in a passionate piece of prose, “Yi ge Zhongguo qingnian xinzhong de Baobo Dilun” 一个中国青年心中的鲍勃迪伦 (Bob Dylan in the Heart of a Chinese Youth). The article opens with an interestingly crafted incipit, which sees Xiao Hai upset in bed, ready to delve into Dylan’s autobiography as he does every night, who learns

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<sup>95</sup> Pozzana, *La poesia pensante*, 115.

<sup>96</sup> Yeh, “The ‘Cult of Poetry,’” 53.

<sup>97</sup> Guo Jinniu, *Zhishang huanxiang*, 23.

<sup>98</sup> Van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry*, 91–136.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*, 94.

from his WeChat that much-anticipated snow is falling outside, and is unable to decide whether to dress up again and go outside or stay in the warmth of bed. What matters is that the association of the two—snow and Dylan—makes him remember winter 2014. Back then he was terribly busy at the factory where he used to work, which was late with a shipment and therefore required workers to stay overtime, often until late at night. Angry and frustrated, he had no interest whatsoever in the pop music played inside the workshop, and therefore started to listen to Dylan’s songs on his phone. It was love at first sight—or hear. He was instantaneously captivated, to the point that he would take out his phone from time to time to peek at the translated lyrics. His experience listening to Dylan’s music was, in fact, twofold. Depending on his mood, he would sometimes frantically listen to his songs, experiencing intense excitement, and then, calmly, he would go through the lyrics to better grasp their meaning. “Bob Dylan’s songs”, he writes, “completely shock my soul, arid after so many years of drifting around factories” (鲍勃迪伦的歌曲把我长年漂泊工厂，那荒漠化的灵魂给彻底震撼了本文来), and continues:

我们都像一块滚石一样，在祖国德大地上随处滚落。没有昨天没有明天也迷失在流浪德生存丛林里。[...] 某种程度来说是鲍勃·迪伦的歌曲拯救了我。在我迷失、彷徨、崩溃无助的时候，他歌曲里的人道主义情怀慰藉了我。[...] 进入他的思想里，我瞬间仿佛不再是一个孤独无助的、被抛弃在社会边缘和生存边缘的流浪儿、不再是一个失败无助的打工仔，我成了一个有血有肉的有志青年、热血男儿。[...] 鲍勃·迪伦的歌曲让我有勇气面对自己，然后敢去追寻自己内心深处真正想要的东西，这点我想才是最重要的。

We are all like rolling stones, rolling around the vast territory of the motherland. With no yesterday, with no tomorrow, lost in the jungle of a wanderer’s existence. [...] To a certain degree, it is Bob Dylan’s songs that saved me. When I was feeling lost, hesitant, crushed, helpless, the feeling of humanism in his songs consoled me. [...] One with his thought, all of a sudden it appeared like I was

no longer a solitary wanderer, helpless and abandoned at the margins of society and life, a defeated migrant worker with no possibility to get back on my feet. I became a determined young man, alive and breathing, pervaded by hot blood. [...] It was Bob Dylan's songs that allowed me to find the courage to face myself, and then to dare going after the things that I deeply felt I wanted for real. In my opinion, this is the most important thing.<sup>100</sup>

The discovery of Dylan has the contours of *yuanfen* 缘分, or serendipity, much like the discovery of Haizi. Dylan appears as a spiritual guide (精神领袖)<sup>101</sup> whose inspiration allows Xiao Hai not only to evade from the vulgar everyday and find the strength to ascend to his own aspirations, but mostly to find his true inner self. This is consistent with Xiao Hai's vision of poetry as the art *par excellence* digging out the emotional self buried by life, which makes it easier to understand why Xiao Hai does not strictly distinguish between music and poetry, valuing their ability to stir up his own passions as the most fundamental thing. This is what motivated him to actively reuse Dylan's music as raw material. His rewritings are partly a tribute to and partly a translation of his new music hero into his real life. With all the evident differences, this operation is perfectly aligned with Yang Xiaobin's observation that Obscure and post-Obscure poets would cite foreign poets in their work not just as pure tribute: "They are also expressing their own experiences of contemporary China, experiences that are to some degree comparable to those of their foreign counterparts."<sup>102</sup>

Xiao Hai has rewritten five songs of Dylan's. All of such rewritings are antecedent to 2017, although Dylan does occasionally appear in his later production as well:

1. Knockin' on Heaven's Door / Qing wei wo dianliang xingchen 请为我点亮星辰 (Please, Light the Stars for Me)

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<sup>100</sup> Xiao Hai, "Yi ge Zhongguo qingnian," 36.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, 39.

<sup>102</sup> Xiaobin Yang, "Transcultural Translation/Transference," 43.

2. Every Grain of Sand / Mei di xue 每滴血 (Every Drop of Blood)
3. Dignity / Ziyou 自由 (Freedom)
4. Mr Tambourine Man / Hai Fan Gao xiansheng 嗨 梵高先生 (Hey, Mr van Gogh)
5. It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding) / Zhe hen hao zuguo 这很好 祖国 (It's Alright, Motherland)

These rewritings, which also contain some of Xiao Hai's most captivating figures,<sup>103</sup> are skilfully constructed on the basis of specific images or structural elements of the source texts. Some adhere more to Dylan's songs, others tend to take a more autonomous path. "Qing wei wo dianliang xingchen," for example, whose very title reflects the celestial imagination of "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," maintains the rhythmic repetition of the refrain as well as the reference to Mama, although the historically-contingent anti-war message of Dylan's is translated into melancholic homesickness, contiguous with longing for the days long gone (elements absolutely central in Xiao Hai's general production as well as in migrant-worker poetry at large), as can be seen from the first stanza:<sup>104</sup>

Mama, take this badge off of me	mama, it's snowing in the winter here
I can't use it anymore	I see flowers ready to blossom getting frozen
It's gettin' dark, too dark for me to see	in a night like this I'd like to go back home
I feel like I'm knockin' on heaven's door	but I really can't see the road of return

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<sup>103</sup> Among these captivating images, I would definitely count the following: "the river of sorrow here is going to fill out my memories" (可悲伤的河流这就要填满我的记忆), playing on the ambiguity between flooding memories with pain and the risk of them being rewritten or reinterpreted by the adult man following his life experiences; "wavering hesitatingly between doubt and belief" (在怀疑与相信之间徘徊); "slave of life" (生活的奴隶), interpretable as wage slavery; "scorching my dreams with that resplendent gold" (用那灿烂的金黄烧灼我的梦).

<sup>104</sup> All of Dylan's lyrics are taken from the [bobdylan.com](http://bobdylan.com) website.

Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door	please, light light light the stars for me
Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door	please, light light light the stars for me <sup>105</sup>
Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door	
Knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door	

A similar operation occurs with “Mei di xue”, the rewriting of “Every Grain of Sand”. The latter is an intense declaration of one’s current station in the journey of their life, simultaneously looking back and forward, replete with spiritual references and therefore understood as having a Biblical inspiration.<sup>106</sup> Spirituality can indeed be seen from the focus on such a minute element as “every grain of sand”. Xiao Hai’s poem is similarly a statement of the present, propped up by a delicate balance between belief and disbelief, significance and emptiness, perseverance and loss. Contrary to the previous case, though, here Xiao Hai only rarely follows the source text’s pattern; he does so, for example, by closing every second stanza with “every drop of blood” (the source having “every grain of sand”). Like the source, then, Xiao Hai focuses on one key element, but replaces sand with blood, a more macabre choice indeed, which pointedly refers to the “sweat and

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<sup>105</sup> 妈妈 这里的冬天下着雪

我看到正要开放的花儿渐被冻伤

我想要在这样的夜晚回家

可怎么都看不清归去的路

请为我点亮 点亮 点亮星辰

请为我点亮 点亮 点亮星辰

(Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 149).

<sup>106</sup> Smith, 2018: 334.

blood” metaphor of high-intensity labour and conveys an idea of extreme hardship, associable with exploitation.

“Ziyou” (from “Dignity”) displays a likewise interesting structure. In both we find Dylan and Xiao Hai in a painstaking but perseverant search for any trace, or word, or script of dignity/freedom in what appears as a bleak world. Formally, the rhythm of Dylan’s song is marked by the repetition of “dignity,” usually preceded by a different preposition or ulterior elements (“for dignity,” “of dignity,” “about dignity,” “have you seen dignity”), *zunyan* 尊严 in the Chinese version read by Xiao Hai. He repeats the structure in a specular way in the beginning, but then developing a more autonomous pattern as the poem progresses. Hence, while the first stanzas are regular and somewhat mirror the source, such regularity is eventually broken and the poem proceeds in a more irregular way until the last stanza, where the four-verse stanza scheme and the mirror structure are recomposed.

“Hai Fan Gao xiansheng” is compelling in yet one more sense. “Mr Tambourine Man” can be understood as a passionate plea to an artist for inspiration, a solace against disappointment and depression, in “a magical escape from everything.”<sup>107</sup> The same occurs in Xiao Hai’s poem, moved by a yearning to escape from a condition where he cannot find his true self, enslaved to life’s constraints, frustrated in the accomplishment of his desires. But the choice of Mr van Gogh as the creative replacement of Mr Tambourine Man comes directly from Haizi, who also cited him in his poems, an act through which Xiao Hai brings together his two muses. Like in the previous examples, and to some greater degree, the structure is taken from the song, with the refrain—“Hey! Mr Tambourine Man, play a song for me”—maintained and readapted into “Hey! Mr van Gogh / give me a brush” (嗨 梵高先生 / 请给我一支画笔吧), or “give me a bit of colour” (请给我一点儿色彩吧).<sup>108</sup> Consequently, Dylan’s psychedelic atmosphere is either mediated by a nocturnal

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, 115.

<sup>108</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 157.



landscape reminiscent of van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, or by (possibly) borrowing from other, more spiritual lyrics of Dylan's, with angels, creators and God populating Xiao Hai's verses.

And finally, we have "It's Alright, Ma"/"Zhe hen hao zuguo". Released in 1965, "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" is Dylan's "grim masterpiece," "loaded with some of the most memorable images Bob ever created: flesh-colored Christ figures glow in the dark; money did not talk, it swore; even the United States President had to stand naked."<sup>109</sup> Intense and calm at the same time, this "powerhouse piece of impressionism"<sup>110</sup> stands out as a detailed and measured survey of the ills of modern society, including hypocrisy, bigotry, consumerism, petty political partisanship. Constantly addressing a disoriented and disillusioned interlocutor, developing slowly but steadily until the final declaration of rebellion, which wraps up this 360-degree critique of social institutions: "And if my thought-dreams could be seen / They'd probably put my head in a guillotine / But it's alright, Ma, it's life, and life only." Somewhat reflecting the importance attributed to Dylan's song, Xiao Hai claims that he produced "Zhe hen hao zuguo" as a poem where "I could, from my point of view as an ordinary young Chinese worker, write out my view of life and my values" (以一个中国普通青年工人的角度写出自己的人生观和价值观).<sup>111</sup> However, perhaps paradoxically, this is the poem where Xiao Hai moves farther away from his muse, not only on the formal level. For sure, Xiao Hai keeps the dialogic model with an imaginary interlocutor, as well as the attack on commercialism ("money is the butcher of everything"; 金钱是一切的主宰者) and hypocrisy ("democracy crowning your head liberty hiding in your pocket"; 民主在你的头上冠着 自由在你的兜里揣着), interspersed with puzzling evocations of the past, in the form of Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇, symbolising the inevitability of death ("today [he's] also left nothing more than a cold corpse; 如今

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<sup>109</sup> Howard, *Down the Highway*, 173.

<sup>110</sup> Smith, *Writing Dylan*, 119.

<sup>111</sup> Xiao Hai, "Yi ge Zhongguo qingnian," 39.

也不过是落得个尸寒骨凉), and the proverbial roads to Rome in the original are replaced by roads to Egypt in order to become “a grain of shameful sand under the curses of pharaohs” (一粒受法老施咒的屈辱沙子). A sense of unescapable, predetermined destiny looms over the verses, coupled with stiff existential immobility (against the background of the material reality of labour mobility), to the point that “living is but one more trap of death” (活着不过是又一个死亡的陷阱) and paradoxically even synonymous with self-destruction. It is the poet himself, then, who craves existential loss, a baffling form of evasion. The poem closes up on a final note of aridity of values, and possibly of art, ignored by all:

在思想贫瘠的土壤里结不出一粒可吃的麦子  
只有沙粒 石头和野花在恣意生长 永无止境  
我的无字墓碑斜倒在着火的乱石堆旁 野花凋零 太阳毒照  
我曾在人世间打盹儿逗留 世俗的枷锁比地狱的还要坚还要硬  
去向天堂之城要先经过地狱之门  
来自黑暗之中的嚎叫快要推倒那看似总坚不可摧的围墙  
但没有人听到 没有人听到

熄掉所有的幻想 我不过是千千万万找寻者其中的一个迷失者  
这很好 祖国 这真的很好  
就如同你曾对我说的一样 就如同你曾对我说的一样一样

in the barren soil of mind, impossible to find one grain of edible wheat  
there's only sand stones and wildflowers growing uncontrolled endlessly  
my nameless gravestone slides beside a pile of stones taking fire wildflowers whither sun's sick  
I used to doze away in the earthly world the worldly yoke is firmer and harder than hellish chains

to go to the City of Heaven one must first pass through the Gates of Hell  
the howl from the depths of darkness will soon bring down the seemingly impregnable wall  
but no one will hear no one will hear

extinguish all illusions I am just one lost traveller among millions of searchers  
it's alright, motherland it's really alright  
it's just like you used to tell me precisely like you used to tell me<sup>112</sup>

This final note of disillusion towards a broken promise by the motherland—one could even say unattained Chinese dream—also connects with the critique of society which underpins Dylan's artistic endeavour. In another piece, Xiao Hai states that he was attracted to Dylan by his “humanist spirit, that transcending, carefree spirit that saw everyone as equal” (人文精神，那种超越的，挣脱的，众生平等的精神).<sup>113</sup> While his later production, especially from his body of factory poetry, would better reflect, implicitly or explicitly, as we have seen, on structural conditions of inequality and oppression, “Zhe hen hao zuguo”—written on 29 December 2014—undoubtedly constitutes Xiao Hai's most accomplished poem in terms of humanist, romantic and spiritual critique of contemporary society.

How are we to frame Xiao Hai's operation of rewriting within a theoretical and methodological perspective? Adaptation, or readaptation (or even domestication), are correct but insufficient terms. We are not faced with plain interlingual translation, nor cultural translation in its commonly-assumed meaning of non-textual migrancy, although both are there, to some degree. I would argue it is more a matter of creating points of contact, of writing through translation. Sherry Simon suggests that conceptualising an overlap between translation and writing does not imply

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<sup>112</sup> Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 158–162.

<sup>113</sup> Xiao Hai, “Yi ge daling shibai,” 130.

“that the two terms be used interchangeably, but to explore the variety of practices which occur at this border – practices where translation tests its boundaries.” Here, she continues, “The words of the Other become a means – explicit or implicit – through which writing is generated.”<sup>114</sup> Writing through translation is therefore a creative act, through which the source text is inventively negotiated, re-elaborated, tailored according to the translator-writer’s intent. The category of transference, put forward by Yang with respect to Obscure and post-Obscure poets’ foreign references, is also useful here, as it is “understood as an active relationship that is based on psychic and emotional filiations,” where the “master” (Yang borrows transference from psychoanalytical theory, particularly Lacan’s) appears not as a figure with a superior status, but rather as an object of desire, whose message can also get lost in the author’s “passionate engagement” with it.<sup>115</sup>

Naturally, all this can be interpreted as nothing more than an elaborate effort to increase the symbolic capital, to claim a right of entry into the literary field by demonstrating skilfulness and versatility, to acquire a business card to show to the field’s infamous gatekeepers on the part of an individual separated from the field by the class boundary. Yang himself identifies the final goal of transference in improving the author’s literary status. However, a meticulously planned strategy of assault on the temple of literature is hardly spottable in Xiao Hai. It would also be inconsistent with several biographical and authorial details we have examined in the course of this chapter and his vision of poetry. If anything, the intertextual effort can be framed as part of Xiao Hai’s construction of his poetic persona; in other words, in an attempt to create his own family tree, his own pantheon (which brings us straight to the cult of poetry).

Two aspects are more relevant to the discussion: 1) Who is chosen to be part of the family tree. The most prominent ancestors Xiao Hai has chosen for himself are Haizi, as the epitome of the poet hero who gives his life for the pure and noble ideal of poetry, and Bob Dylan, a US singer with

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<sup>114</sup> Simon, “A Single Brushstroke,” 110.

<sup>115</sup> Xiaobin Yang, “Transcultural Translation/Transference,” 44, 54.

whom he feels a connection for his ability to express the anguishes as well as the persisting hopes of his youth. The couple, if not unlikely, for sure is not commonly seen around; and 2) That his models are not other migrant worker poets, not even Xu Lizhi, who could easily be considered the newest entry in the tragic-heroic tradition of the suicidal triad going from Qu Yuan 屈原 down to Haizi and Gu Cheng 顾城, all haloed as martyrs of poetry. This reinforces Zhang Huiyu's argument that new worker authors can be fully interpreted only at the light of the influence of contemporary culture, literary and popular alike, which is much stronger on them than any other preceding tradition of working-class culture—or its more recent manifestations, for that matter.<sup>116</sup> The result cannot but be extremely fragmentary and heterogeneous, lacking all the internal and external compactness of proletarian culture from the revolutionary and socialist periods, crumbled apart following Reform. In a way, this opens more questions than it answers, but for sure it connects to pressing issues of contemporary poetry in China, starting with the social role that poetry itself can assume (even beyond already-tested patterns) and the multiple, compelling incarnations it can take in different hands.

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<sup>116</sup> Zhang Huiyu, "Literature as Medium."

*Chapter Six.*  
*Songs of Labour Most Glorious: Xu Liangyuan*

Among the members of the Picun Literature Group, Xu Liangyuan stands out for his thematic and stylistic versatility. His poetry is filled with kinship, interpersonal relationships, love, gender and spirituality, besides the omnipresent labour, combining free, colloquial verse with classical forms and themes. When it comes to his labour-focused production, another compelling trait of his poetry lies in the connections it consciously or unconsciously weaves together with classical Chinese poetry (Tang and Song above all), as well as with working-class culture prior to 1978. These connections manifest themselves through citations of tropes, images, moods, phrases, slogans, or in the employment of stylistic and formal devices. Both connections should not be taken as obvious. Perhaps, the former, i.e. that with classical poetry, is the most expectable, considering the persistent symbolic and cultural authority it exerts on creative minds and ordinary people alike in China today. The latter, i.e. that with 20th-century working-class culture, is even more compelling, considering, as we have seen (especially in chapter Two), that an apparent gulf exists between it and contemporary cultural practices on the part of workers.

A preliminary analysis will focus on Xu's life and his characteristics and preferences of themes and style. This preliminary analysis is helpful not only to properly place Xu's works under analysis within the frame of the author's personal development, but also to highlight his accomplishments and peculiarities. Secondly, and more specifically for the purposes of this chapter, Xu's work will be put against the background of the above-said traditions it consciously or unconsciously connects to, in order to discuss what it draws from previous literary experiences and how it possibly enriches them. The chapter aims at critically examining what kinds of traditions are

more resonant with him and why, how are they readapted by him, and to what extent Xu can be considered an exception in the context of contemporary workers' poetry in China.

In this sense, the relevance of Xu's oeuvre lies in that it constitutes an excellent opportunity to discuss contemporary worker authors' relationship with their literary and political past, to see how such past is rarely readapted as it is, but rather translated and negotiated within the conditions of a radically different present.

### 6.1. Xu Liangyuan's life and writing

Not the oldest member of the Picun crowd, but definitely one of the earlier generations, Xu was born in 1965 in Shuichengcun, a village in Dawu county, Hubei province. The county has a significant revolutionary history, as it was part of the Hubei–Henan–Anhui Soviet in the 1930s. Hubei overall has been one of the major suppliers of migrant labour, and Dawu itself had a “poor county” status until 2020. Xu's life is known thanks to his autobiography, a one-page piece written for the 2017 edition of *Laodongzhe de shi yu ge*, not as engaging as Xiao Hai's “Confessions,” but full of details.<sup>1</sup> Following a common pattern among people who would eventually take the road to the city, Xu left formal education in 1983, after completing junior middle school, to go farming. He left the fields soon afterwards as he was hired by a newly-established ferrosilicon factory in Dawu in 1985, first as an electric welder, then, after an accident, tending to the furnaces. His contract expired in 1987 and he returned home to pick up his agricultural tools again.

Xu's *dagong* life reprised in 1993, as he relocated to Shenyang, to work in a construction site. Later, in 1994, he moved to Guangdong, where he did several different jobs in factories and construction, mainly around Guangzhou and Dongguan. Of the period, he particularly recalls the

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<sup>1</sup> Xu Liangyuan, “Wo de zizhuan,” 248. Other biographical details are reported in Sun Junbin and Wang Qian, “Beijing Picun de ‘Fanyusumen.’”

plight of endless, overcrowded train trips.<sup>2</sup> This period was marked by a series of misfortunes—he was seriously injured on the workplace but forced to continue working, often he could only see his wife from behind her factory’s iron fences, he suffered from a badly-performed vasectomy, and, finally, the couple had to pay a heavy fine for inadvertently giving birth to a third son, in violation of family planning (which allowed only two children per couple in rural areas).

Xu eventually moved to Beijing in 2003, after a short stay in Tianjin. The effort to curb the SARS epidemic, which was underway, had led to stricter regulations and controls to reduce the inbound floating population as well. He once shared his memory of having to flee the *hutong* where he lived and hide in a riverside cabbage field to avoid controls by public security agents.<sup>3</sup> After the end of the health emergency, the situation relaxed for Xu as well—probably also because, coincidentally, the coercive “custody and repatriation” system (referenced to in chapter Three) was abolished around the same time. The system allowed authorities to detain and expel individuals found without a temporary residence permit (*zanzhuzheng* 暂住证), but it also gave room to extrajudicial abuses that culminated with the violent death of the 27-year-old migrant labourer Sun Zhigang on 20 March 2003 (in passing, he was also from Hubei), whose case produced a significant media uproar and led to the abolition of the system in the summer. Xu’s wife was able to reach him later on, and in 2013 their three children moved in with them. Although still without a Beijing *hukou*, the family was able to reunite. Xu now works regularly on several construction projects, well respected by other workers as well, who at times have chosen him as their spokesperson to bring grievances to company managers or lawyers.<sup>4</sup>

Xu’s life has been accompanied by his passion for writing. This element is highly resonant with the cases of Fan Yusu (chapter Four) and Xiao Hai (chapter Five), as we have already seen, but

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<sup>2</sup> Interview on 5 December 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Sun Jianbin and Wang Qian, “Beijing Picun de ‘Fanyusumen.’”

<sup>4</sup> Liu Weiwei, “Gongyou Xu Liangyuan.”



it is actually paradigmatic for the whole scene of migrant worker authors. Some of his verses picture a mimetic, faithful portrait of his own migrating experience, while at the same time using an ennobling language to extract it from its mundane dimension and confer new meaning to it. Let us take the following lines: “I was a blind migrant sent on an errand by the assembly line / then retaken in by the foreman with his motor / who gave me an enamelware bowl / who gave me an ample shovel” (我本来就是被流水线打发了的盲流/被工头用摩托捡回来的//给我一只洋瓷碗/给我一把大方锹).<sup>5</sup> What is notable in these two couplets, taken from “Sichuan lai de xiaogong” 四川来的小工 (Unskilled Labourer from Sichuan—which of course is not self-referential, given that Xu is from Hubei), is the presence of an “enamelware bowl,” ennobling the otherwise insignificant tools used by construction workers. The whole picture is given a somewhat positive connotation also by the passive voice and the agentic role of the foreman, who appears like the one who saves the migrant labourer by giving them a noble instrument of work, apparently considered more fulfilling than an anonymous assembly line. We will encounter this element again later in the discussion. For now, let us return to writing per se, and Xu’s relationship with it.

Xu started writing when he was still a farmer, just after leaving school; he would work on the fields during the day and write at night. He abandoned this practice for a certain period, reprising it in full only after hitting the *dagong* road. Writing, for him, was also therapeutic. While fellow workers spent their free time playing cards, smoking or drinking, Xu would go outside, writing under lamplights on the roadside, or in the complete dark, and taking advantage of rainy days to make fair copies.<sup>6</sup> Seeing the other workers spending their free time like that made him uncomfortable, because he would have liked them to take better care of their health, like when they do not even wear face masks while working.<sup>7</sup> Like Xiao Hai, Xu’s attitude reprimands individuals

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<sup>5</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Liu Weiwei, “Gongyou Xu Liangyuan,” 119.

<sup>7</sup> Interview on 5 December 2019.

for letting the monotony of “sad passions” replace a healthier desire for culture. Not without a certain paternalism, this emerges in the clearest terms in “Yuanjing fangjing” 圆镜 方镜 (Round Mirror, Flat Mirror), as Xu addresses what he sees as a self-indulging girl: “adding makeup to your eyebrows / humming, you go through your cosmetic case / but never have I seen you go through / the books under your eyes” (画眉补妆/呼啦啦地翻着化妆盒/却从不见你翻过眼前的/这些书).<sup>8</sup> These lines, while extremely questionable in their reproach of the act of applying makeup, are interesting from the perspective of the present discussion because they offer an idea of the extent to which Xu sees cultural production and fruition in general, symbolised by the book, as an alternative to mundanity. While for Xiao Hai, like many other migrant worker authors, writing is therapeutic in the sense that it offers personal comfort and satisfaction, for Xu it is so also from a moral and ethical point of view.

Moving to Beijing gave further motivation to his writing. In 2008, he joined the capital’s local chapter of the Poetry Society of China, an organisation under the aegis of the Federation of Literary and Art Circles. Shortly thereafter, he privately published his first collection, *Liangyouyuan geng yin* 良莠园耕吟 (*Ploughing Chant of the Garden of the Paragon and the Rascal*; the Chinese title is a pun made with the characters in Xu Liangyuan’s name), which included some 200 poems. He remembers with dismay how he would later inadvertently lose another book full of poems (interestingly, the experience of losing books during migration is used with strong metaphorical implications by Wan Huashan, as will be discussed in chapter Eight).<sup>9</sup> Around the same period, while continuing to pen poems, he also wrote four film scripts, depicting evictions and demolitions in *Zuihou de fangdong* 最后的房东 (*The Last Landlord*), left-behind children in *Gedai zhuanyan* 隔代传烟 (*Generation Heritage*), the dilemma of poor people needing costly medical attention in

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<sup>8</sup> Xu, *Chengbian de yecao*, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Interview on 5 December 2019.

*Fengyu yangguang* 风雨阳光 (*Storms and Sunrays*), and the lives of migrant vendors with the manifold problems encountered in adapting to urban markets in *Dazahui* 大杂烩 (Hodgepodge). As opposed to his poetry, these scripts do not seem to contain substantial autobiographic elements, if not only direct ones (i.e. the result of observations into Xu's human and social surroundings). To date, he has not been able to screen any of them, and he sees no concrete possibility of doing so in the near future. However, they are indicative of Xu's strong attention on the lives and problems of other migrant labourers.

An even more essential turn happened after Xu joined the PLC in 2014. He first learned of the village after participating to an edition of the Migrant Workers' Spring Festival Gala, and soon thereafter, he started going to the activities and lectures of both the literature group and Lü Tu's Workers' University (both the gala and the university are activities run by the Migrant Workers Home mentioned in chapter Three). He would even take (unpaid) days off to go. Xu himself points out that his poems won the appreciation of Sun Heng and Wang Dezhi, who praised their adherence to reality and the way in which they depicted it.<sup>10</sup> His production has been constantly promoted by the overall group as well, and he was the cover man for the second issue of *Xin gongren wenxue*. Xu declares that participation in the group's life has immensely influenced his development and encouraged his resolve to continue writing. As a consequence, he feels grateful towards Beijing, because in his eyes the city means greater possibility to do something out of his passion, in addition to more job opportunities.<sup>11</sup> Considering himself as someone who has more than mere sweat and labour-force to trade, his has been a successful "bet," as he writes in "Chengli xiaoshi" 城里小诗 (Little Poems in the City): "but there are also / people who gamble / their prematurely grey hair / on some little poems" (却还有/拿早生华发/去赌几首/小诗的人).<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the possibility to

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*; Liu Weiwei, "Gongyou Xu Liangyuan," 120.

<sup>12</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 10.

enjoy such an active cultural life seems to partly obscure the social oppression endured by migrant labourers. In actuality, what Xu enjoys, i.e. the cultural activity promoted by the Migrant Workers Home, rather than a given, is the fruit of an active effort and a complex negotiation between two sets of actors (the activists and the state) with very asymmetrical relations of power.

In terms of reference and inspiration, Xu is fond of Tang and Song poetry (although he also cites Qu Yuan during our conversations), and loves to recite some of it by heart. Among his models and sources of inspirations, he mentions Li Bai, Du Fu 杜甫, Su Dongpo 苏东坡—naturally, he brings up the biggest names of the Tang-Song poetic tradition—and Mao Zedong.<sup>13</sup> He believes that each poet needs a base to start from, otherwise it would be very hard for them to put their emotions into words. Unsurprisingly, this base is found, at least partly, in the everlasting cultural authority of classical poetry as the quintessence of what poetry should be like in China.<sup>14</sup> According to Xu, writing (and reading) is primarily a way to find solace and comfort (again, not unlike Fan Yusu and Xiao Hai). Partly reflecting a common trend among authors and commentators of contemporary workers' literature, as well as a ubiquitous trope of literary criticism in China, he argues that writing helps him putting into words and making sense of his own experience (经历) and the “era” (时代) he lives in. Moreover, he contends that writing is in its purest form when it is non-institutional, or “amateur.” For an author to live off literature, in his opinion, includes the risk of having to lower their personal standards to meet the requirements of the publishing market. A “hobby” (爱好), on the contrary, is “the greatest motive force” (最大的动力).<sup>15</sup> This stance is a proud declaration of creative independence from the commodification of literature, which resonates also with a similar view expressed by Fan Yusu about her own role as a writer (see chapter Four).

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<sup>13</sup> Interview on 5 December 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Inwood, *Verse Going Viral*.

<sup>15</sup> Interview on 5 December 2019.

Here it is useful to recall the Bourdieusian division of the field of literary production between large-scale production, directed marketable, and restricted production, namely for peers (other producers of literature).<sup>16</sup> Fang Wei creatively readapts these categories to classify authors as well, specifically arguing that authors with a high political and social security tend to adopt hegemonic aesthetics and to be in the institutions for literary control, while other, more outsider authors (such as amateur or independent authors) tend to keep themselves at distance from such institutions (see the Introduction). Xu's case is interesting because, as it often happens with worker poets, he can hardly fit in any of these types alone. For sure, he exhibits an open refusal of large-scale production (which he assimilates to professionalised, marketable writing), but he also shows an acceptance of literary institutions (suffice it to consider his membership in the Beijing Poetry Society) and established canons (Tang-Song poetry), which are considered by him to be expressions of literature in its more authentic sense. Despite being an amateur author with a substantially low public status, and no particular economic capital that could derive from the sale of his works, Xu still places considerable trust on institutions perceived to be authoritative in the literary field. This reveals a somewhat ambiguous, non-linear (and non-unanimous) relation of worker poets with literary institutions (and here I count also established literary history), which are able to maintain their symbolic authority, even higher, I suggest, when they show acceptance of "amateur" writers and are perceived as the opposite pole to the commodification of literature.

Finally, Xu is also very clear about the importance of workers' art to "raise the awareness" (提醒) of workers about themselves, their lives, and society.<sup>17</sup> A keyword he has used for his own work is "familiarity" (熟悉) with working and living conditions,<sup>18</sup> a keyword that compellingly links him to debates around previous experiments of proletarian and/or realist literatures, including

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<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> Interview on 5 December 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Liu Weiwei, "Gongyou Xu Liangyuan," 120.

the dilemmas of left-wing writers and the Lu Xun-Sha Ting discussion, up to the Yan'an Talks (see chapter One). If we wanted to go back to the general criteria for defining workers' literature discussed in the Introduction, we might say that Xu is assigning considerable emphasis on readership (the *for* of the triad with *by* and *about*), viewing what he writes also as the result of a certain social responsibility on the part of himself as the author (and therefore also the *by* is important in this case). More generally, the idea that workers' art can have a positive impact on workers' self-consciousness is also rooted in the past of working-class cultural production in China (and beyond). Of course, while authors of proletarian literature framed such "consciousness-making" result of socially-committed productions as part of the revolutionary action they considered themselves part of, in Xu's case the goal is far less political, and more connected to the role traditionally assigned to literature in China as a moral educator for the people. At the same time, of course this is also entirely fitting in the Migrant Workers Home's mission for workers to acquire and elaborate their own culture. Here we see how different historical traditions (workers' literature, traditional literature), personal motivations (the author's own) and collective spaces (such as the one provided by the Migrant Workers Home, in this case) form the organic context in which the authors under analysis carry on their writing activity.

## 6.2. Poetics and labour

Xu Liangyuan, as already mentioned, is one of the few in the PLC to have an individual anthology. Published in 2017, it contains 100 poems of his, covering a time range from the late 1990s to the 2010s. The title, *Chengbian de yecao* 城边的野草 (*Wild Grass By the City*), immediately evokes Lu Xun and *Yecao* 野草 (*Wild Grass*), his collection of prose poems. Like in the case of Xiao Hai's *Gongchang de haojiao*, both deliberately or involuntarily nod to a prestigious predecessor with a high symbolic capital, while adding some elements to stress the specificity of the

new work; and so, Ginsberg's *Howl* becomes *of the factory* in factory labourer Xiao Hai's case, and Lu Xun's *Wild Grass* is located *by the city* in construction worker Xu's instance. Of course, in the triangulation of forces that constitute the PLC's micro-literary mode of production recalled in chapter Three, mediators also play a role in suggesting the titles of these volumes, particularly helping to highlight such connections.<sup>19</sup>

In the poem after which the collection is named, a Lao Cao 老曹, a former migrant worker who has gone home for good, calls and wonders about the situation of his fellow workers who have remained in the city. A striking opposition is built between Lao Cao, who seems to have reached his Nirvana after returning home, and the others still in the city, depicted as still struggling, toiling away, and worn out. The conversation with Lao Cao makes the poem formally compact, the first two-verse stanza introducing Lao Cao, the second four-verse stanza asking about "me," the third three-verse stanza asking about Lao Wang 老王. The fourth stanza, considerably longer, is also introduced by a question by Lao Cao, but it gradually departs from the dialogic pattern, and the poem achieves thematic autonomy from the conversation:

这活越来越不好找  
就像今年夏天的雨水一样少  
季节过了都没盼着  
立秋的第二天 愁闷的我刚转到那片荒郊  
忽然来了一场秋雨  
把我全身淋个透心浇  
  
啊!

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Xiao Hai on 21 September 2019.

这雨淋得真舒服

淋得真好

城边的野草差点没早死

终于得救了

these jobs are harder and harder to find

as few as this summer's rain

the season has passed without much expectation

on the second day of autumn in low spirits I had just gone to the outskirts

when an autumn rain came all of a sudden

drenching me down to my heart

ah!

how good does this rain feel

everything's wet real good

the wild grass by the city, almost dried to death

have finally got their salvation

The image of rain has considerable importance here, and it seems only natural to think in terms of possible references to Tang and Song poetry, given Xu's passion for it. In a notable difference from this poem, rain is usually associated with spring, not autumn; and when it is, like in Du Fu, it brings more havoc than benefit. And yet, while referring to spring, Du Fu conveys a very similar picture in his "Chunwan xiyu" 春晚喜雨 (Spring Night, Delighting in Rain), where rain is conjured up as a real agent, "stirring new growth the moment spring arrives" (當春乃發生), so that, against a damp landscape, the traveller gazes "blossoms heavy over the City of Brocade" (花重錦



官城), the City of Brocade referring to Chengdu, where Du Fu lived.<sup>20</sup> In both poems, although seasons are different, we have rebirth, a wet environment, and a city. However, oddly enough, rain is associated with jobs in Xu's verses, and them wetting the land almost dried to death simply and directly means that the poet has found a job that allows him to survive. Moving away from strict immediacy, the rainy landscape works as a metaphor for the worker poet's ability to endure in the city, evading the risk of drying to death. If that is the case, the wild grass may be a metaphor for Xu himself, not far from Bai Lianchun's image of the "rural soil in the cracks of the city" (城市縫隙里的乡土).<sup>21</sup>

"Chengbian de yecao" also reveals some general characteristics of Xu's poetics. Language is mainly plain and colloquial, and most of his poems are strongly message-based, forgoing greater articulation of form in favour of a more narrative composition. Often, his poems are stories (or tales) in verses. Some are structured as dialogues. Verses are generally short and concise. Other individual samples of his oeuvre display a more garnished architecture, but are also less paraphrastic, employing images semantically distant from their material references or more compelling metaphors. This particularly happens in his rural or nostalgic works (where nostalgia means homesickness, longing for the left-behind rural home), as well as, quite unsurprisingly, in his fixed-form poems. Here follows an example from "Yuan dian" 远点 (Farther Away):

远点

感情的潮倦落了

又升起了大海的湛蓝

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<sup>20</sup> The translation is taken from Watson, *The Selected Poems of Du Fu*, 85.

<sup>21</sup> Bai Lianchun, "Chengshi fengxi."

远点

我在只有夏天和秋天的地方

盼望春天

farther away

exhausted fall the waves of emotion

and lift up the azure of the ocean

farther away

in a land with only summer and autumn

I long for spring<sup>22</sup>

While references to Guangdong's climate and to a migrant's life are clear, the metaphors of sea azure for resilience and spring for hope and aspiration are aesthetically powerful and stylistically well crafted. Their power lies precisely in their ability to connect a moral condition to a more abstract, spiritual, and emotional dimension, finding new signifiers to express this real-life experience on a different level. Longing for spring is immediately recognisable as a widely-used trope in classical Chinese poetry as well, and here we have another concrete instance of the inspiration that Xu draws from that tradition to express very "contemporary" themes. Likewise, in "Sixiangshu" 相思树 (Mutual Love Tree), the trope of the tree is adapted to the condition of modern migrants through the element of the telephone wire (essential for maintaining contact through distance and separation) attached to the mutual love tree, which does not supersede the

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<sup>22</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 120.

ancient flavour of the trope, but rather gives full play to the multifaceted sense of love, romantic nostalgia and “sighing for” embedded in *xiangsi* 相思 (as explained by Santangelo).<sup>23</sup>

Xu’s fascination with classical themes finds its best expression in “Taopao de niulang” 逃跑的牛郎 (The Oxherd on the Run), a relatively long poem where he rewrites the folk tale of the Cowherd and the Weaver. The myth, which dates back to the *Shijing*, tells the story of the forbidden love between the (male) Cowherd and the (female) Weaver, who were then banished to the opposite sides of the Milky Way (the *Tianhe* 天河, the Heavenly River). The two are reunited only one day every year, celebrated in China as the Qixi Festival in summer. The tale has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for later poets (including Du Fu), and has given rise to many interpretations, also depending on the multiple variations of the legend, but it is canonically understood as a story of distant love.<sup>24</sup> By rewriting it, not only does Xu take his place in the long line of poets who have been inspired by the tale, but provides a very peculiar point of view as a migrant worker who has endured many years of marital separation. Xu clearly identifies with the Oxherd (with Fan Yusu even calling him “a oxherd in the run” in the praise to his poetry collection), who has “dared to step on the city’s romantic magpie bridge” (竟敢踏上城市浪漫的鹊桥)—the Oxherd and the Weaver reunite thanks to magpies forming a bridge for them—but who is tormented by guilt: “am I a sinner who has abandoned his family and [farming] duties?” (我是抛家舍业的罪人么). Likewise, the Weaver (who here looks more like a Homeric Penelope attending to the household) has to “fly to the strip of sky of the city” (飞向了城市的那片天). Xu Liangyuan writing with fervour that “I don’t blame you / no one can blame you!” (不怪你/不能怪你啊!) is even more relevant in its opposition to Xu Lizhi’s poem “Chejian, wo de qingchun zaici geqian” 车间，我的青春在此搁浅 (The Workshop, Where My Youth Is Stranded). In the poem, he confesses the psychological

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<sup>23</sup> Santangelo, “The Cult of Love.”

<sup>24</sup> Fu, Xiuyan, *Chinese Narratologies*, 149.

pressure to reproach himself for his own ordeals, as he reports the vicious words of a factory cadre, “no one forced you / to migrate for work” (出来打工的/没人逼你), and how they made him feel “tied / to the column of memory’s humiliation” (捆绑在/回忆的耻辱柱).<sup>25</sup> In the end, a solution is found in proximity and solidarity, that is recreating a family life in the city, making possible in this world the impossible reunion of the Oxherd and the Weaver:

我来了，只要我们两人能在一起

就不在乎这城里的风风雨雨

[...]

哪怕你在那边工厂熬夜加班

哪怕我在这边工地拼命流汗

哪怕汗水流到嘴里

也像喝了蜜糖一样甜

I have come, and as long as we are together

we won't have to worry about the storms of this city

[...]

even if you have to work overtime all night at your factory

even if I have to sweat my life out at my construction site

still will the sweat flowing into our mouths

taste sweet like honey and sugar<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Xu, *Xin de yi tian*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 13–14.

Indeed, readapting old tales to contemporary themes is not a unique quality of Xu's, not even within the Picun literature group. Zhang Huiyu, for example, analyses how the classical genre of *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人, or scholar-beauty, has inspired group member Ma Dayong's fiction, building a compelling parallel with Lu Xun's *Gushi xinbian* 故事新编 (*Old Tales Retold*), as both set off from ancient stories and readapt them to their intention to advance a narrative critique of present circumstances.<sup>27</sup> While these readaptations always serve their authors' sensitivities and narrative interests, the peculiarity of Xu's and Ma's cases is that a colonisation of imagery by labour occurs, as labour-related atmospheres, figures and events (possibly drawn from their own life experiences) underpin the readaptation of legends and tropes.

Some metaphors recur elsewhere in Xu's poetry, but with different usages. Water, for example, makes frequent appearances, especially in the form of rain, and of the rain of sweat that falls from the worker's body "under the burning spicy sun" (火辣辣的太阳下) of the South, the "colony of cement" (水泥的殖民地) where several poems are set.<sup>28</sup> The typical poetic phrase *fengyu* 风雨 is inevitably there, too, but it is creatively readapted by Xu in distinctively "proletarian" terms in "Hanshui pinpai" 汗水品牌 (Trademark Sweat): "sweat dripping like rain / limbs as fast as wind" (挥汗如雨/手脚快如风).<sup>29</sup> While a trite image of traditional Chinese poetry reincarnates in the semantic and material dimension of labour, Xu also bridges with another typical trope of contemporary workers' poetry, one of the most distinctive expressions for exploitation and alienation, namely, the juxtaposition of the worker's body (also through bodily synecdoche, like

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<sup>27</sup> Zhang Huiyu, "Literature as Medium." An overview of the *caizi* trope after the Qing dynasty can be found in Yiyang Wang, *Narrating China*, 73–81.

<sup>28</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 55.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 104.

sweat or blood) with the commodity, as he writes that “salty sweat is / our trademark” (我们的品牌是/咸味的汗水).<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Xu’s repertoire reveals a richness of ways and images to refer to labour, or, more precisely, labourers. He strongly focuses on singular individualities, with “galleries” of characters (his fellow workers) as a constant aspect of his poetics; such galleries tend to emerge as heavily gendered, with women either appearing as objects of contemplation, even in their dignity, or as embodying vacuity and mundanity, but never as speaking subjects. This fact can be partly due to the construction site being a predominantly male working environment, but it would be far too easy to dismiss the problem *just* like this (especially given the other representations of female individuals we have seen earlier in this chapter). These galleries of individuals are depicted in various ways, ranging from the martial language of “Jiaqiaochong” 甲壳虫 (Beetle) to the softer but equally strong imagery of “Hanxiucao” 含羞草 (Sensitive Plant). In the latter case, the figure of the sensitive flower, standing high, proud and smiley despite being ignored or even trampled upon by everyone else in this “era full of [consumerist] desire” (充满欲望的时代), creates a captivating parallelism with the condition of workers in the very same era, “when political visions of labour have become rarefied,”<sup>31</sup> especially when Xu addresses the flower the following way: “in this age of messy steps / your body is too insignificant / your voice is too feeble” (这个脚步混乱的时代/你的身材太渺小/你的声音也太弱小).<sup>32</sup> At the same time, though, it could also be a symbol of poetry and an admission of its apparent weakness against vulgar desires, counterbalanced by its persisting expressive power. And also in this case, the employment of natural images in association

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, 105.

<sup>31</sup> Pozzana, “Poetry,” 193.

<sup>32</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 89.

with melancholic emotions, such as longing and desires, resonates at least in part with the tradition of *ci* 词 poetry.

Animal metaphors are employed by Xu with particular skilfulness, above all through the figures of insects. Contemporary Chinese poetry is not devoid of a more or less allusive animal imagery, suffice it to think of Xi Chuan's 西川 portrayal of poetry as a "winged animal" (翅膀的动物).<sup>33</sup> Liu Dongwu remarks that animal imagery, of which *dagong* poetry is chockfull, is yet one more exposure of the mark left on migrant workers' bodies by the hardships of their unique social condition, while also exposing "a leading motive behind their writing, originating from a self-interpretation (自我阐释) on a group that has to count on itself in order to survive".<sup>34</sup> Animals and insects in particular have been a constant presence in modern and contemporary Chinese fiction. Xiao Hong 萧红 and Mo Yan, for example, both investigate the empathetic relationship between human and animal, whose differences are constantly blurred and questioned; Can Xue 残雪, on an entirely different plane, collocates insects within her narrative specifically to transmit a sense of eeriness to the individual's inner experience and human relationships.<sup>35</sup> In Xu's poetry, insects are endowed with some characteristics otherwise associated with labourers, like fatigue, but also mutual help, and therefore embody a possibility for self-reflection through the othering of the self, or, more precisely, the outering of one's own condition. "Qiuyin xiongdi" 蚯蚓兄弟 (Brother Earthworm) is a foremost example of this. In the poem, Xu begs forgiveness to earthworms for piercing through their tiny bodies with his shovel while doing his job. Although he acknowledges he is doing this job to survive, he still feels like he is "making war to the underground / making war to the innocent" (向地下开战/向无辜开战). He describes the building under construction as a tomb of cement, and

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<sup>33</sup> Van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry*, 357.

<sup>34</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Dagong wenxue*, 285.

<sup>35</sup> Idema, *Insects*.

here the distinction between the human and animal worlds begins to blur, as the poem gets more enigmatic and existential, and it is really unclear whether the poet is addressing earthworms or himself while wondering: “you live on the bottoms of the earth / how different is the tomb of life / from the tomb of death?” (你生在地底层/活着的埋葬/和死去的埋葬又有什么两样). The end is a characteristic Zhuangzi/butterfly moment:

蚯蚓兄弟

那夜

我做了一个奇怪的梦

梦见自己

变成了一条瘦长的蚯蚓

你变成了 一个高大健壮的农夫

你举着锄头

把我一劈两半

我没有躲闪

Brother Earthworm

that night

I had a weird dream

I saw myself

transformed into a thin and long earthworm

and you had transformed into a tall and robust farmer

with your shovel

you cut me in half



and I did not dodge<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, this part is highly remindful of the proverbial butterfly dream told by Zhuangzi—plus a Karmic acceptance of the innocent’s revenge, although Xu makes explicit a relation of transformation and continuity between the dreamer and the dreamt, while the *Zhuangzi* episode, as pointed out by Möller, is rather held together by the discontinuous dialectics of *you* 有 (presence) and *wu* 无 (non-presence).<sup>37</sup> Xu does not seem intent on producing a complex philosophical musing; rather, the Daoist innuendo is indicative of Xu’s employment of the resources of traditional culture to serve his distinct creative style. Here, identification through empathy with the insect is the prevailing element, part of the general feature of his poetry to pay attention to the little or the belittled, and to use images of minuteness (blades of grass, puny flowers, tiny insects) to reassert workers’ tenacity *vis-à-vis* their precarious condition.<sup>38</sup> The interpretation of the delicate flower as an epitome for the labourer is reinforced by a similar figure in “Xiao cao” 小草 (Little Grass): “We are little grass, dry and weak” (我们是又干又瘦的小草).<sup>39</sup> This also leads us back to my hypothesis that Xu is indeed the wild grass by the road (to the city).

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<sup>36</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 58.

<sup>37</sup> Möller, “Zhuangzi’s ‘Dream of the Butterfly.’”

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, this characteristic of softness and extreme sensitivity extend to other elements as well, including inanimate objects, which have no direct relation to labourers. The most emotionally moving instance, and also one of his stylistically most accomplished ones, and certainly very intimate, too, is that of books. In “Tie jiazi” 铁架子 (Iron Shelves), Xu dreams of a better collocation for his books, his “loyal companion” (忠实的伙伴) now shabbily arranged “in the damp and moldy underbed” (潮湿发霉的床底下), so that they will be able to “breathe freely” (透透气) and “enjoy the sunrays coming from the window” (见见窗户照进的阳光; *Chengbian de yecao*, 178).

<sup>39</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 106.

### 6.3. Is labour glorious?

Moving on to his body of works more directly involved with labour, one of the most evident characteristics of Xu's is to be found in how he goes against a dominant trend in present-day workers' poetry to abandon any glorious narrative of labour and replace it with a more individual, retrospective, at times melancholic language, or submerged under the depiction or denouncement of the dreadful conditions on the assembly line, the dormitory (and the dormitory regime),<sup>40</sup> or other lodgings. "Wazhuangong" 挖桩工 (Excavator Workers) is one of the examples where this finds its most organic manifestation:

挖，挖，挖

挖掘机崩掉了门牙，终于累倒了

老弱的轱辘井绳，

忙着迈开三条腿，接上了茬

挖，不停地挖

这栋未来大楼的名字，

就叫国际时间大厦

一场时间的争夺战

时间是金，时间是银

我们挖金，我们挖银

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<sup>40</sup> For the specific configuration of factory regime termed as the dormitory labour regime, see Smith and Pun, "The Dormitory Labor Regime," and Chan, Selden and Pun, *Diying for an iPhone*.

快点、快点、再快点

深点、深点、再深点

挖桩工人，深井下的安全帽晃动不停

锤钎声声，汗水淋淋

一层，一层，又一层，

一桶，一桶，又一桶

挖不尽的岁月，挖不尽的泥土

这万吨泥土的长征

在大地上垒起一座高高的纪念塔

我们的挖土专家

你丰富的想象

可不能高出这三脚架

井绳三千尺，

悠长的井绳

这唯一的生命线

快把我们绞上来吧

看，

我们汗透的迷彩服

染上地底的原红色

就像烈焰火山喷出的外星人

dig, dig, dig

the excavator's teeth collapse, finally tired from overwork

the weak old windlass well, striding its three legs, reaches the crops

dig, incessantly dig

this future building's name is International Time Plaza

a competition of time

time is gold, time is silver

we dig gold, we dig silver

faster, faster, faster again

deeper, deeper, deeper again

excavating workers, safety helmets down the pit are rocking all the time

hammers drill and drill, sweat drips and drips

one floor, another floor, one more floor

one bucket, another bucket, one more bucket

days that cannot be excavated    soil that cannot be excavated

this long march of 10,000-ton clay

on earth raises a towering monument

our soil-digging experts

your rich imagination

can't rise higher than this tripod

the rope is three thousand *chi*,

long-drawn-out rope

only lifeline

quick bring us up!

look,

our sweat-soaked camouflage coats

are stained with the original red of the bottoms of the earth

like aliens blown out of a raging volcano<sup>41</sup>

The poem is divided in two parts, and this is only the first, written in 1998. The second part is undated, but it is topologically and imaginatively distant from the first. It follows construction workers in other endeavours of theirs, like working on a road (in this sense, it spatially departs from the construction site), and it creates a parallel between excavating for building purposes and digging into memory, a parallel only hinted at in the first part quoted above. The reference to sweat and the repetition of verbs in the poem (“faster, faster, faster again”) are indicators for fatigue and haste, attributes that point a labour-intensive job. Formally, they are indebted to a well-known poem by Yu Dafu, *Xin yi ge* 洗衣歌 (*Song of Laundry*), where the repetitive job of the laundress is similarly expressed linguistically and visually through verbal repetition.

Here we find nothing strictly assimilable to the solitude and anomie of Xu Lizhi’s worker/screw falling to the ground with anyone barely noticing, or to Tang Yihong’s decaying work uniform, with all its symbolism of a bygone era when workers enjoyed a prominent role in society, not to mention Xie Xiangnan’s machine devouring workers and expelling them out of its “asshole”

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<sup>41</sup> Xu, *Chengbian de yecao*, 16.

(从机器的屁眼里/出来).<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, the building labourers are working on is presented like a monument, but here, the building is a metonym for labour itself, especially given that there is nothing to suggest that this particular building is in any way different from the numberless others that constitute the “forest of others” (别人的森林), as Guo Fulai addresses the city (as mentioned in chapter Two, the city is often described as the “city of others” in migrant workers’ literature).<sup>43</sup> Sure, as we have seen, there is sweat and there is haste, skilfully conveyed with the paced rhythm of verb repetition. But hard labour and tight time constraints alone do not account for labour exploitation in the sociological (and Marxian) sense. The general image and central element of the poem remain the solemnity and the proud language used to describe workers’ activity. The dynamics of labour here are not (self-)destructive, as in Xiao Hai, but dignified. In the second part, also the trope of the juxtaposition of worker’s bodies and the instruments of labour (generally the machines) is represented in a positive light, as a marker of identification more than alienation, or a spring of strength: “reinforced concrete / irrigates / our bones” (钢筋水泥/浇灌/我们的筋骨).<sup>44</sup> And to go back to monumental imagery, the Chinese Red Army’s 10,000-*li* Long March is also present both in its symbolic value and as a dignifying metaphor, ironically but aptly translated as a 10,000-ton clay Long March (万吨泥土的长征). In other words, the previous representations as modest but dignified insects or flowers has completely given way to a more mighty portrayal.

The same applies to the way Xu describes his relationship with machines. Such relationship is an omnipresent trait of workers’ poetry, not only contemporary, and tracing the changes in its representation can be extremely helpful in mapping the evolution of worker poetry as a whole genre and in connection with the shifting roles of the working class in China. A times in line with topoi

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<sup>42</sup> The quote comes from Xie Xiangnan’s “Qianyan yishi” 前沿轶事 (Anecdotes from the Front Line; *Xie Xiangnan shixuan*,305).

<sup>43</sup> Guo Fulai, “Xiegei haizi,”140.

<sup>44</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 17.

found in migrant-worker poetry (anthropomorphic machines above all), Xu otherwise displays a less negative relationship with machines, again characterised more by bonding or assimilation than vilification. For instance:

蒙上大口罩，  
罩上油腻的工服  
我就是机器，机器就是我  
我开着机器，机器开着我

behind the big mask,  
clad on the greasy working uniform  
I am the machine, the machines is I  
I turn on the machine, the machine turns on I<sup>45</sup>

Such language is remindful of the industrial labour narrative in use during the Mao era, when labour was hailed as “the most glorious” (最光荣), surrounded by an aura of sacrality, a deed that found its finest realisation in its own fruit, distributed among the working people themselves.<sup>46</sup> This proposition which continues to be held up by the Chinese party-state also in the present times,<sup>47</sup> although in a much different context and under definitely more strident contradictions. Scholarly literature, principally Xie Baojie’s 谢保杰 *Zhuti, xiangxiang yu biaoda* 主题，想象与表达 (*Subject, Imagination, and Expression*), Cai Xiang’s *Revolution & Its Narratives* and Volland’s *Socialist Cosmopolitanism*, provides a useful account of the ennobling aesthetics activated in the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, 153.

<sup>46</sup> Miin-ling Yu, “Labour Is Glorious.”

<sup>47</sup> Xi, “Xi Jinping tan laodong.”

cultural production of the 1949–1976 period, often in evident opposition with the tropes of post-1980s workers’ literature, particularly in the portrayal of the microcosm of the shopfloor. But the nobility of labour is first of all a fundamental thesis of Marxism. Marx and Engels held that labour was the primary link between human and nature, with Engels going so far as to declare it “the basic condition for all human existence,”<sup>48</sup> whose creative and transformative power was constrained by capitalist exploitation.

The discourse on the glory of (urban) labour had practical effects, particularly with the welfare system provided by the *danwei* 单位 (work unit), a totalising system where labour and welfare were simultaneously produced and awarded, in an absolute juxtaposition of private and public life.<sup>49</sup> However, beside the *tiefanwan* 铁饭碗 (iron rice bowl, the buzzword for the job security provided by the *danwei* system), it also had (has?) evident, powerfully-binding symbolic implications. According to Wang Ban, the symbolic authority assigned to labour boiled down, in its essence, to the conferral of “meaningfulness”: one of the most crucial aspects that made the socialist workplace different from the capitalist one was its transformation into a site of cultural, beside material, production, in order to liberate workers’ creativity and capacity as three-dimensional human beings.<sup>50</sup> Cultural production was in fact promoted by the state in the form of workers’ clubs, workers’ universities, artistic and literary training classes for workers, experiments at collective writing (especially during the Cultural Revolution), and other forms.<sup>51</sup> Regardless whether this is assumed to be a genuine expression of proletarian empowerment, or semi-empty propaganda whose realisation was hampered by the very bureaucracy that promoted it, its importance in forging a collective imagination of workers as “masters of the country”—and the symbolic fracture occurred

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<sup>48</sup> Engels, “The Part Played by Labour,” 15.

<sup>49</sup> Bray, “Social Space and Governance.”

<sup>50</sup> Ban Wang, “Dignity of Labour.”

<sup>51</sup> Wang Hongzhe and Qiu Linchuan, “Kongjian, jiqiao, yu shengying”; Zhang, “Literature as Medium.”



with the passage from Maoism to Dengism—should not be underestimated. Giving labour(ers) a sense of glory, dignity and pride was a rite of institution (of the socialist worker’s subjecthood), an act that “*signifies* to someone what his identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone [...] and thus informing him in an authoritative manner of what he is and what he must be.”<sup>52</sup>

One of the best-condensed and accomplished aspects of labour-related cultural production before 1978 was *gongnongbing wenxue* (worker-peasant-soldier literature), which also came mainly in the form of poetry. Most about this type of literature was discussed in chapter One. However, it is useful to recall that, not differently from the worker poetry under our survey here, *gongnongbing* poetry was also authored by labourers themselves, and it provided a most definite answer to the vexed questions about the implied readership and intended themes of workers’ poetry (*for* whom and *about* what): its producers were also its readers (and vice versa—which is consistent with the effort of overcoming the division between manual and intellectual labour, central to the whole socialist endeavour), and it had to serve the cause of the proletarian revolution. After 1949, of course, the revolutionary cause equated with the cause of the state under proletarian dictatorship, and this filled *gongnongbing* poetry not only with activism, but also with aggrandising eulogies of the nation’s bright future ahead. Political lyricism, its centrepiece style, is uncompromisingly described by van Crevel as “patriotic to the point of being chauvinist,” “so uncomplicated as to insult any reader’s intellect,” “truculent and bombastic, full of sloganizing and predictable bigger-than-life imagery.”<sup>53</sup> But beyond repetitive patterns, clichéd tropes and, last but not least, political constraints, *gongnongbing* poets should be credited with creating a kind of aesthetics that drew “inspiration from things and places in which their predecessors had discovered no stimulus.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 121.

<sup>53</sup> Van Crevel, *Language Shattered*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Lin, *Modern Chinese Poetry*, 241.

While there is no lack of superficial similarities between *gongnongbing* poetry and what has been written by worker poets after 1978, they may be overwhelmed by differences in content and style, not to mention context. We have already seen how the representation of the workplace, the factory above all, is no magnified scenery, but a demeaning environment framed by negative sentiments. Post-1978 workers' poetry is more autonomous, not only from political prescriptions (i.e., what is supposed to say) and any operative function that it is expected to perform, but also in terms of style. To some degree, *gongnongbing* poetry saw a return to fixed verse and patterns, partly to follow the metrics of folk songs and add a more popular taste to it. Even more a fundamental difference lies in the impossibility (as of yet) of post-1980s workers' poetry to go from a predominantly descriptive account to a prescriptive one—to wit, from a class-in-itself representation to a class-for-itself representation (that *gongnongbing* poetry purported to be).

Among contemporary worker poets, Xu is undoubtedly one of those who are closer to pre-1978 working-class culture. When asked about this, he appeared dismissive at first, and suggested that appreciation of *gongnongbing* poetry is part of the nostalgic aspect of “red culture,” a phenomenon half-way between nostalgia and state propaganda, but distinctively post-revolutionary and post-socialist. Later, however, he acknowledged that *gongnongbing* literature must be considered a step in history, but he still defended the individuality of his own style, which, he remarked, cannot be called *gongnongbing*.<sup>55</sup> This strong demarcation with pre-1978 working-class cultural production, which is typical not only of PLC authors, but also of many other contemporary poets and critics, compels us to think of this relation in alternative terms than just “continuation.”

There is indeed one poem by Xu's that is as political-lyricist as it gets, and that is “Mao zhuxi, women cong Beijing lai kan ni” 毛主席，我们从北京来看你 (Chairman Mao, We Have Come from Beijing to See You). The poem was composed by Xu while following the New Workers' Music Band in a tour to the Hunan in summer 2019, which also reached Mao's birthplace of

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<sup>55</sup> Interview on 5 December 2019.

Shaoshan. First published in *Gongyou wenxue* 工友文学(Workmate Literature), another unofficial outlet based in Beijing that publishes poetry by or about labourers, on the formal plane the poem contains several tropes belonging to either political lyricism or, more generally, to the cultural imagination that was hegemonic from the 1950s to the 1970s: the bird's eye view over the motherland's mountains and rivers, the masses as "our" teachers, the red sun rising, the sunrays that illuminate every bit of the country's land, the people becoming one with Mao. Here are some excerpts:

毛主席，我们从北京来看你  
我们仿佛听到到你湖南口音的重声调  
欢迎你们离开喧嚣的城市  
多看看祖国的山川大地  
多听听老百姓的心声记忆

[...]

毛主席，我们从北京来看你  
一路上看到了过去的村庄、老屋  
墙上依稀存着  
那个时代写的高举红旗  
我们经过了有年头的水库、河渠  
水面上荡漾着时代的涟漪  
还有老人指着村里最大的一块十亩田  
说那个时代整平它全靠大集体  
我们在前砌青砖，后垒土坯墙的  
农家屋里，花钱不多，却梦得很香甜

Chairman Mao, we have come from Beijing to see you  
we feel like we can hear a voice in your strong Hunanese accent  
welcoming us from the noisy city  
to see the mountains and rivers of our homeland  
to hear the thoughts and memories of ordinary people  
[...]

Chairman Mao, we have come from Beijing to see you  
on the road we have seen your village, your old home  
dimly the wall still shows  
the high red flag written in that age  
we have passed by old reservoirs and canals  
the waters undulating with the ripples of the era  
and old people who pointed at the largest 10-*mu* field in the village  
saying that back then it was all collective property  
in our old homes with black bricks and sun-dried mud bricks  
in the back, we don't have much money, but dream sweet dreams<sup>56</sup>

However, differences are as relevant. Firstly, the movement is reversed: poems and songs of the Maoist period would see people going from remote lands to the centre, to Beijing, to see Mao (the red sun rising in the East, right where Beijing is), while in this case, the worker poet goes from Beijing to remote rural areas (the rural–urban migrant leaving the city to go to the countryside is itself another reversed movement). Secondly, the poem does not sing praises of the present, but portrays the destitution of rural areas and reports peasants' nostalgia for the past. In this sense, then, it is remindful of the operation carried out forty years earlier by two Menglong poets, Duo Duo 多多 and Mang Ke 芒克, who resorted to two trite symbols of so-called Maospeak, namely the sun

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<sup>56</sup> Xu Liangyuan, "Mao zhuxi," 67, 68.

and the sunflower, to break linguistic conventions by putting them to an entirely different use. The formal analogy only allows for the distortion of established symbolism to emerge even more clearly.

And yet, there are many elements in Xu's poetry that reinforce the "labour is glorious" narrative and continue to divert our attention to *gongnongbing* poetry. Some of the characters that emerge from Xu's verses are formidable workers, in no way inferior to classical socialist paragons. Construction worker Lao Li 老李 in "Hu lala" 呼啦啦 (*Hey lala*), for example, is a robust but modest worker, who eventually wins his comrades' awe by scaring off the rich with words that clearly evoke workers' dignity to the face of the well-off—"you're not one who toils / what's the point of all this stupid fuss [you're making]" (你不是干活的人/瞎在这里掺和啥)—and by humbly but, from a lyrical point of view, heroically asserting that he is not seeking glory or money, but just to provide for his family: "I, Lao Li, work right for this family of mine!" (老李我干活就是为了这个家). The poem strikes the eye also for its circularity and the rhythmic onomatopoeia in its opening and closing stanzas:

山风呼啦啦

挖掘机械呼啦啦

西山山庄扬尘呼啦啦

[...]

山风呼啦啦

挖掘机械呼啦啦

老李抡锤呼啦啦

mountain wind, *hey lala*

excavator machine, *hey lala*

raising dust in the village on Western Hills, *hey lala*

[...]

mountain wind, *hey lala*

excavator machine, *hey lala*

Lao Li swings his hammer, *hey lala*<sup>57</sup>

In a similar fashion appears the “sister with handicapped legs” (腿脚残疾的大姐) in “Qingchen laodong wu” 清晨劳动舞 (Morning Dance of Labour). Her figure is supremely dignified, starting with the very title, which refers to the “dance” she makes when limping to work. She is described as absolutely equal to her “sane” comrades, and sublimated to an even higher level: “your two legs have risen up / and refuse to bend down again” (你有一双站起来了 / 就不愿再弯下去的双腿).<sup>58</sup> A similar language would be expectable in political lyricism, but its figures would be different. It would have been the nation or the people to rise, and to inspire others to rise as well, or possibly a model worker. Here, the theme is individualised, there are no working people rising up, but only an individual worker. Any metonymical intent is thwarted by her being a cripple, a condition that can hardly be considered identifiable with. Hers is no triumphant march to glory, but the affirmation of an intrinsic identity (the dignity of labour) *vis-à-vis* a pending belittlement which is only alluded at.

These are but some of the characters we encounter in Xu’s poems, largely situated in the microcosm of the *gongdi* 工地, the construction site, the place behind the “fence of sentiments” (感情栅栏)<sup>59</sup> where the journey of the migrant finally stops. The construction site is likewise described as *jianghu*,<sup>60</sup> this time in all its polysemic power as both an ideal world (rivers and lakes) and the

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<sup>57</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 23–26.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, 70.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, 108.

condition of knight-errands and outlaws beyond the boundaries of ordered society, but often bound together by ties of brotherhood. In another poem, Xu writes of himself seeing a *gongyou* who is leaving the *gongdi* heterotopia by donating him “the spirit and righteousness of working on the construction site” (工地打工的情和义).<sup>61</sup> *Gongnongbing* images are thereby mixed up with other classical elements—quite far from anything worker-peasant-soldier, but not alien to Xu’s production—to uphold the dignity and moral upstanding of labourers.

However, as already mentioned, dignity does not mean lack of hard labour, and hard labour, alone, is not exploitation. Quite the contrary is true, as the hardness of the task only increases its nobility by making it achievable through dignifying struggle/strive (*fendou* 奋斗). Nor does exalting the virtues of labour does automatically imply the erasure of asymmetrical relations of power. Fatigue and weariness, especially with the usual figure of sweat, are everywhere in Xu’s poetry, also with extreme hyperboles: “even the old Lord of Heaven cannot bear it anymore” (老天爷也累坏了).<sup>62</sup> Xu also displays a witty and sharp sarcasm in several instances, which contrasts with the solemn tone of other poems of his (and worker poets in general), and is generally employed

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, 68. The translation of this verse presents several difficulties. First of all, I translate into “working” what Xu explicitly terms *dagong*, not *laodong*; of course, “working” entirely loses the specificity of *dagong*, leaving it implicit and counting on the reader’s knowledge of the author’s background. Conversely, other translations, like “of migrant labour”, or “of precarious labour”, would be too stiff. Despite the fact that we later find elements with positive connotations, that may make us think of a contrast, I do not believe that Xu’s focus was on the precarity or even prejudice that comes with being *dagong*, but on the more general, objective experience of *dagongers*. *Qing* and, to a lesser extent, *yi*, are way more challenging. *Yi* carries also an ambiguous meaning, but “righteousness” here seems to serve it just fine, also in its difference with the “institutional”-sounding “justice.” As for *qing*, we know with Epstein (“Competing Discourses,” 65) that the word carries multiple significations—physiological, spiritual, phenomenological and aesthetic. “Spirit” seems to be a feasible option to convey both the emotion associated with the construction site and the higher, complex phenomenological implication that Xu is suggesting.

<sup>62</sup> Xu Liangyuan, *Chengbian de yecao*, 38.

to highlight the most negative aspects of the migrant labourer's life, including limited agency, inequality, or employers' hypocrisy. One of the most well-crafted puns appears in "Fu You Kang baochuangchang" 富又康刨床厂 ("Rich and Healthy" Planer Factory), where Xu plays with the highfalutin name of the factory to expose the not-so-ideal conditions endured by those working inside it—the never-ending noise of the workshop is indeed rich (满车间呜呜哇哇的噪音挺丰富), the iron foam workers breath is all but healthy (漂浮的铁沫吸满了鼻孔/我希望我的肺部坚强又健康).<sup>63</sup> These are all aspects that take Xu's poetry farther from *gongnongbing*/socialist literature, but also define his unique style with respect to the general characteristics of contemporary worker poetry.

In this sense, recourse to individual workers, and to their individual labouring practice, as metonyms for labour offers the possibility to give the abstract notion of *laodong* a concrete incarnation. As Yu Jian suggests, "I praise labour / I praise labourers" (我赞美劳动/我赞美劳动者).<sup>64</sup> Like all flesh-and-bone incarnations, though, they are pervaded by ambiguity and contradiction.

The metaphors, imagery and figures Xu uses to describe workers or himself are another case in point. Some of the metaphors mentioned above, associating the worker with insects, flowers and other tiny elements, would have been absolutely unacceptable in previous, aggrandising narratives. Furthermore, in some verses more concerned with psychological reflections, Xu does not appear to cherish much hope in his future. The mighty *jianghu* we find in other poems coldly states that "can no longer delude others / and deludes himself" (骗不了别人/就骗自己) in "Pian ziji" 骗自己 (Self-delusion). In "Zhongdian" 终点 (Terminal Point), one of his best-crafted poems from a stylistic point of view, in that it is architecturally held together by the word *zhongdian*, placed at the

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, 153.

<sup>64</sup> Yu, "Wo zanmei," 19.



end of almost all verses, Xu even more indicates an inescapable condition: “the road of migrant labour has no terminal point / the road of migrant workers fighting for their salary has no terminal point” (打工之路没有终点 打工讨薪之路没有终点).<sup>65</sup>

What are we to make of these two aspects—dignity, nobility, glory of labour on the one hand, and what appears to be adverse circumstances (i.e. class subalternity and wage exploitation), to say the least, on the other? How does the *gongnongbing-plus-jianghu* element, coupled with other tropes of contemporary workers’ literature (fatigue, exclusion, disparity, disorientation in the city...), help explain this author’s production, and contribute to the larger discussion on migrant-worker poetry? The knot concerns the effective possibilities offered by the re-enactment of the symbolic authority of the glory of labour. Placed in a global context, the answer to this question would appear to be null. Questioning what they perceived as Marx’s “positivism,” trends of the European left, like Italian workerism, as early as in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, began to lose faith in the emancipatory potential of labour and gradually came to reject the working class as historical subject. In *Empire*, Negri and Hardt argue that “The refusal of work and authority, or really the refusal of voluntary servitude, [is] the beginning of liberatory politics.”<sup>66</sup> A reaction to the setback of socialist politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, skepticism about the role of labour flashes, for example, in the theatrical piece *Women2 我们 2*, also promoted by Picun, which questions the very value of labour and whether human beings actually need labour and what for.<sup>67</sup> However, this is a very rare case of a line of thought that, almost resonant with Negri and Hardt, attempts to overcome labour altogether. In general, undoubtedly also due to the legacy of the 20th century, activists and cultural practitioners who work on workers’ issues tend to focus their attention on the structural conditions of labour exploitation. Labour itself maintains a strong symbolic fascination as the source of all

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, 31.

<sup>66</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 204.

<sup>67</sup> Iovene, “Utopias of Unalienated Labor.”

human activity. The very motto of Migrant Workers Home is precisely “Labour is the most glorious” (劳动最光荣).

It would be incorrect to see this as a mere repetition of past catchphrases, or as a tragic illusion. It is way more productive to consider the slogan (and its translation into poetry) as a form of negotiation with reality, an effort to assume an identity to navigate an objective situation where labour, pushed under unfavourable relations on the workplace (and in society), appears to be all but glorious. The memory of socialism is conjured up as an imagined counterweight to the commodification of the migrant workforce, the mainstay of what Florence befittingly terms the “overhaul of the condition of labour in post-socialist China.”<sup>68</sup> This operation reveals no simple nostalgia, because the dignity of labour is not the epitome of a bright past to return to, but an injunction perceived to maintain its power and validity in the present, too.

In Xu’s poetry, at least, this injunction acquires a new lifeline as a form of symbolic resistance to the aforementioned overhaul of the condition of labour in present China, emphasising the nobility and centrality of workers against their exploitation and devaluation. In other words, it is a critique of prevailing social relations no less sharp than what we find, for example, in Xiao Hai. The verses of another early member of the Picun Literature Group, Zhang Hanliang 张汉良 (who stopped writing after 2016), while extremely paraphrastic, clarify the sense of this in a fairly precise way:

真正的劳动者感到光荣，  
就要让他们的劳动被社会尊重，  
有美满的家庭生活，  
还要有幸福满足快乐的感怀!!!

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<sup>68</sup> Florence, “The Cultural Politics,” 224.

to make labourers really feel glorious,  
their labour must be respected by society,  
an harmonious family life,  
and happiness to fulfil joyous sentiments!!!<sup>69</sup>

What is this, if not precisely an appeal to grant workers the social status that they ought to be granted if, like the slogan goes, labour is glorious? Of course, the aspirations outlined here, like that for an harmonious family life, do not look particularly stirring or exciting, nor do they point to any change in social relations. However, they must be read in the context of labour migration, where family separation is one of the most challenging ordeals. Seemingly ordinary, these aspirations are actually political statements that address the reality of society.

Whether this aesthetic strategy can be successful in providing a horizon alternative to the present conditions of exploitation is an entirely different matter. But another option, perhaps prevalent in contemporary worker poetry, is rational fatalism, and that is not a way out, either.<sup>70</sup> For our purposes in investigating how worker writers and poets operate with the cultural material at their disposal, it is nevertheless interesting to point out that traditional working-class culture is generally not a source of conscious inspiration. When it is there, it is unintended, or introjected. The result is a mosaic of conscious and unconscious references from tradition as well as from present-day culture. In this, Xu's poetry perfectly mirrors the situation of post-1980s workers' poetry. In how it uses such material and in the compelling connections it creates with pre-1980s working-class culture, it is creatively unique.

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<sup>69</sup> Zhang Hanliang, "Laodong," 130.

<sup>70</sup> Pozzana, "Poetry."

**Chapter Seven.**  
***Rural Memory in the City: Li Ruo***

Li Ruo is a prolific and outstanding member of the Picun literature group. The present tense may be imprecise, and perhaps it would be more correct to speak in the past tense: she *was*. In 2017, she left Beijing to go back to her native rural home, and her writing has drastically dwindled since then. In this respect, she also unwillingly constitutes an example of the key importance of live participation in the group's activities for its (former) members' continuing literary creativity, and, as opposed to that, the risk of losing it once this (urban) experience comes to an end. But apart from that, Li Ruo has produced a noteworthy amount of writing that calls for careful consideration, especially because they are strongly connected with nativist, or rural, literature (*xiangtu wenxue* 乡土文学) and reportage literature (*baogao wenxue* 报告文学), two other important genres of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Moreover, this connection, intimately related to a representation of the countryside way more than the city, compels us to push the discussion further to analyse how this kind of writing remains also, to a certain extent, *urban*.

This chapter will investigate Li Ruo's use of the textual resources of nativist and reportage literatures (the latter especially in its present-day incarnation as "nonfiction") to represent the countryside from the point of view of a migrant woman who has long left it to settle in the city. In particular, the analysis will concentrate on how she conjures up her memory for a rural past, mediated by the experience of the city. More specifically, how the urban present of the author (characterised by a wide range of material and emotional conditions due to the migrant labourer's position in the social space of the city) influences the way she rearranges her memory of the countryside and finds new meaning in it. While often such memories present a generally positive, if not even idyllic, picture of the countryside, the sense of nostalgia that arises from them must be

assessed in a critical way, and in relation with the urban present it ostensibly contrasts. Such accounts, mostly present in Li Ruo's poetry, are supplemented by an examination of her nonfictional account of the countryside, providing a far less ideal picture of the environment described. The coexistence of an awareness of difficult living conditions in rural areas today and the imaginary space created in memory once more suggests that the representation of the countryside (in both senses), has more to say on the influence of the experience of rural–urban migrancy on the author's mentality and sensibility, than on the countryside per se. In this sense, the relevance of the chapter is not limited on this specific case study. The analysis on Li Ruo's "rural" production can be considered exemplary in the sense that many other authors from the PLC write in very similar terms of their native countryside.

### **7.1. Rural literature by a factory girl.**

Li Ruo stands out also because she is one of the few "factory girls" in the PLC, as opposed to the majority of other women members, who work as domestic workers. "Li Ruo" is actually a pen name, and she has never publicly revealed her true name, in order to continue writing plainly and explicitly about facts and people of her home without fear of being recognised. Like other fellow group members, most notably Xiao Hai and Wan Huashan, Li Ruo comes from Henan, specifically the Xinyang prefecture, where she was born in the 1970s. When she had just started high school, she had to drop out because their family pigs died of swine fever. She worked in the fields first, and then began her migrant labourer's life, working at electronics, textile, and shoe factories in Guangzhou and, later, Suzhou.

Li Ruo visited Beijing for the first time in 1999, fascinated by the rich symbolic and cultural significance of the city, and encouraged by the fact that a cousin of hers was already there at the time (her father had worked in Beijing, too). For a curious trick of destiny, her cousin's dwelling

place, where she crashed for a time, was located nowhere else than Picun. Like other migrants having to find ways to evade custody-and-repatriation inspectors, Li Ruo pretended to be mute when she walked around, in order not to let her Henanese accent slip out.<sup>1</sup> She found a job at a foodstuff factory, where she earned 300 yuan a month. The factory also provided only partial food and lodging. Li Ruo found herself increasingly unable to afford a living in the capital and had to leave after a few months, returning first to Henan, and then to the coast, before finally getting back to Beijing in 2012, where she mainly worked at Migrant Workers Home facilities.

Li Ruo got in touch with the PLC in 2015, and her notoriety was unexpected and sudden. The *Renjian* website was soliciting writings from the group, and Li Ruo, who had only been following the group's classes without publishing anything up to then, decided to hand in some pieces of her own. Their success among netizens was immediate, and *Renjian* crowned her a *liulang nüwang* 流量女王, or “queen of the internet.” It was a life-changer, which profoundly encouraged her to keep on writing.<sup>2</sup> She did in fact continue producing stories, both for the website and for the group's publication, which kept enjoying considerable success and visibility. In 2017, her individual anthology was published with the title *Buguniao de tijiaosheng* 布谷鸟的啼叫声 (*Cry of the Cuckoo*)—the only individual collection of the Picun group together with Xiao Hai's and Xu Liangyuan's.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time she also won an award for a competition themed after “Shenghuo gushi” 生活故事 (Live Stories), launched by the *Jianjiao buluo* blog.

In an interview she gave in 2017, after Fan Yusu's sudden fame brought waves of journalists to Picun, Li Ruo suggested a strongly functionalist vision of literature and of her own role as an author. Her writings, she said, had either to serve as a way to attract concerned people's attention to the problems she was uncovering, or, at the very least, remain as historical documents:

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<sup>1</sup> Li Ruo, “Wo yi ge dagong erdai.”

<sup>2</sup> Wu Jingya, “Picun wenxue xiaozu.”

<sup>3</sup> In the bionote opening the book, Li Ruo is again credited as “*Renjian* column writer” (“人间”栏目作者).

我的文章就是想要让问题引起关注才写出来的，我热爱脚下的土地，我的愿景就是大家共同努力把这些问题解决了。不管能不能起作用，起码把它记录下来，如果我不写出来，在几百年或者一千年之后，那时候的人会知道发生了这些事吗？

The reason why I write is to let these problems be seen and grasped. I love the land under my feet, and my wish is that everyone can work together to handle and resolve these problems. Regardless whether [my writings] can or cannot be of actual help, at least they will record [these problems]; if I won't write about them, in a hundred or a thousand years' time from now, who's going to remember that these things ever happened?<sup>4</sup>

This is only one side of the coin, however. While most of Li Ruo's stories do indeed have a documentary nature, although within the tradition of reportage literature and literary nonfiction (as I will demonstrate), more intimate themes are present as well, or do not suffocate individual creativity under the above-said functionalism. She does not hide a sensation similar to the negative identity which has already been discussed, calling herself a “good-for-nothing” (吃货),<sup>5</sup> and giving her poetic verses in “Lijia chuzou de ren you zui” 离家出走的人有罪 (Guilty Are Those Who Leave Home) the task of conveying some deeper emotional trouble, including the sense of guilty she feels towards her son, for not giving him any material foundation for the improvement of his life, and her parents, for leaving them. Also consistent with the imagination found in postsocialist workers' literature is the sensation of being a mere gearwheel of the industrial machine, which Li Ruo explains powerfully in her “Wo shi anzhuang luosiding de luosiding” 我是安装螺丝钉的螺丝钉 (I'm a Screw Installing Screws), recalling her time at an electronics factory in Suzhou:

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Li Ruo, *Buguniao*: 153.

按照规定，一条生产线一天要做八千个产品，分给我的工作是给插头放螺丝钉——前段的人已组装好插头，流水线把半成品流到我面前，我要飞快地拿起一个盖子扣上去，要扣的刚刚好，上下左右都对齐；再在四个角的小孔里安放上四颗螺丝钉，每次放螺丝钉我都要像武林高手一样稳、准、狠，一次搞定，一刻都不能停，因为后面产品很快又跟来了……

[...] 虽然过去很长时间了，但回想当时在工厂工作的日子，还是像一场可怕的噩梦。

According to the rules, one production line had to finish eight thousand products per day. My job was to put screws into plugs—those before me would assemble the plugs, then the assembly line would bring the half-completed object before me. At lightning speed, I then had to grab a cover and putting it on, making sure it was placed properly, and properly aligned up and down, left and right; then I had to tight four screws into the small holes in the four corners. Every time I felt like I had a *wushu* master's hand, moving steady, fast, wild, I had to do it all in one go, I couldn't stop for one second, because other plugs would soon arrive from behind...

[...] Although a long time has already passed, if I try to remember those days working in the factory, it still feels like a horrifying nightmare.<sup>6</sup>

Li Ruo's fire was as intense as it was short-lived, however. Towards the end of 2017, she went back to Henan to get married, leaving Beijing for good. Although she has not entirely stopped writing since then, the amount of her production has drastically reduced. She remains an important figure tied with the group, however, which keep on involving her in activities. In November 2017, for example, she represented the Picun literature group at the Love-the-Hometown National Conference (*Quanguo Ai Guxiang Dahui* 全国爱故乡大会) in Chongqing, held by an organisation by the same name which promotes intellectual reflection and artistic production on rural areas. She was the recipient of the First Workers' Literature Prize hosted by the Picun literature group in

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*: 25–26.



December 2018, in addition to the aforementioned “Recording the Hometown” award, in September of the same year, and in November she appeared as the cover person for the fourth issue of *Xin gongren wenxue*.

The historical inception of *xiangtu* literature can be traced back to Lu Xun, particularly his short stories “Guxiang” 故乡 (Hometown, 1921), “Shexi” 社戏 (Village Opera, 1922), “Zhufu” 祝福 (New Year’s Sacrifice, 1924), and “Jiulou Shang” 就楼上 (In the Wine Shop, 1924). All these stories are materially located in the countryside, and are variously characterised by the narrator’s sensation of a lost subjective connection with the (often, native) countryside, its inhabitants, its social dynamics (sharply critiqued, especially in “Zhufu”), as well as nature, also as an epitome of agriculture, in its double opposition with the city (intellectual upbringing) and industry (modernity). Memory and the literary investigation of rural areas in general are not motivated by mere nostalgia, but, as Duara points out, push for the revolutionary transformation of those areas.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Lu Xun mirrors one of the key features of other writers of *xiangtu* fiction, i.e. their physical and emotional distance from the object of their literary survey, a place which they often no longer recognised as “their own.” In a somewhat different fashion, Shen Congwen 沈从文, another quite representative author of *xiangtu* literature, in his *Biancheng* 边城 (*Border Town*, 1934) portrays a countryside outside the spell of time, untouched by history and with an idyllic society. In fact, this representation, far from being motivated by simple naivete, carried a critique of urban modernity, which Shen saw as morally corrupt.<sup>8</sup> But in general, it was precisely this distance, or the experience of sojourn elsewhere, that motivated *xiangtu* writers to look back to the countryside, be it for psychological reasons (homesickness, repulsion of the city), or an intention to critique the conditions of the countryside.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Duara, “Local Worlds.”

<sup>8</sup> Zhang, “The Texture of the Metropolis,” 13.

<sup>9</sup> Haddon, “Chinese Nativist Literature,” 107–109.

Soon enough, and *xiangtu* became more of a descriptive term than a specific historical genre with rigorous taxonomic demarcations—or, to put it better, a genre that encompassed several historical periods and was not confined to the early 20th century.<sup>10</sup> *Xiangtu*, then, ended up diluted in other forms of writing about/in the countryside, interspersed, for example, with the work of “peasant writers” (*nongmin zuojia* 农民作家), personified by Zhao Suli 赵树理, and fiction on rural themes (*nongcun ticaixiaoshuo* 农村题材小说), highly politicised and promoted by CCP-affiliated cultural circles. Tao Tao Liu argues that the concept of *xiangtu* literature encompasses writers’ recollections of their place of origin, stories of rural Taiwan (which has, indeed, a distinct *xiangtu* literary production on which a substantial amount of scholarship exists), and “the new *xiangtu* of the eighties in the PRC,” with stories about rural “and city life.” In fact, she stresses that “not only does the term imply rural areas, or at least small town, but it also implies a special relationship of that area to the speaker,”<sup>11</sup> which reconnects with the *xiangtu* author’s distance of the 1920s. Not unrelated to this, another characteristic of a large part of nativist literature is the treatment of peasants as the “Other” to the writing subject, whose point of view tends to remain that of the intellectual urbanite.<sup>12</sup> The expansion of the terms’ scope may also overlap with several other literary genres that sprung up in and after the late 1970s, including, by definition, Root-seeking (*xungen* 寻根), but also Scar (*shanghen* 伤痕), literatures, both of which were represented by authors who had been rusticated as “educated youth” (*zhiqing* 知青) themselves. Critical rigour should warn us against making a hodgepodge of fundamentally different phenomena unified solely by the attention to the countryside. For sure, a strong aesthetic connection with 1920s–1930s *xiangtu* literature is maintained by such an author as Yan Lianke 阎连科, who makes use of many

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<sup>10</sup> Kinkley, “Shen Congwen.”

<sup>11</sup> Tao Tao Liu, “Local Identity,” 142.

<sup>12</sup> Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power, Text*, 240.

of the genre's tropes (marginalised subjects, places seemingly outside of history), but with a paradigmatically different agenda than, say, Shen Congwen's pastoral utopia.

All considered, Haddon sums up the principal characteristics of *xiangtu* literature as follows:

First, nativist literature usually evokes the urban or urbanized narrator's rural, childhood home. In some cases, this rural home is an idealized, imaginary home located in the narrator's ancestral past. Second, nativist literature is structured along the countryside, or, more specifically, the allegorical meanings evoked by the countryside. There are at least four of those meanings: The countryside is the locus of socio-cultural and political forces that cripple the national consciousness; it is the refuge from the forces of modernization; it is the locus of transformation of the Maoist canon; it is the locus of examination of the inefficiency and corruption of the Chinese Communist Party. Third, the characters in nativist literature are disempowered or marginalized types; that is, they are either peasants, other characters from the lower social orders, or women. These resemblances unify nativist literature as a distinct fictional trend.<sup>13</sup>

Li Ruo joins the scene with a perspective on the countryside that comes from a migrant workers, i.e. individuals who has moved and, given the *hukou* situation and the lack of access to stable urban citizenship, remain emotionally on the move. Her complex, bidirectional relationship with the native land has therefore something to add to the vexed questions of the author's relation with it, and with peasants. However, the fact that Li Ruo writes nonfiction, instead of fiction (as is the case in traditional understandings of *xiangtu* literature), requires an additional contextualisation.

As already mentioned in chapter Four, nonfiction as a genre has been immensely popular in China since the late 2000s, and it is also the preferred one within the PLC.<sup>14</sup> In September 2019, Li

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<sup>13</sup> Haddon, "Chinese Nativist Literature," 101.

<sup>14</sup> Xiao Hai has a beautiful poem where he matches the term "nonfiction(al)" to a list of words belonging to a migrant worker's life, from material spaces like the shopfloor and dormitory, to fatigue, youth (and aging), the ever-

Ruo was one of the four group members (together with Jin Hongyang, Wan Huashan and Xiaohai) to win a prize at the “Recording the Hometown: Love Hometown Nonfiction Writing Competition” (*Guxiang jishi. Ai guxiang feixugou xiezuodaasai* 故乡纪事·爱故乡非虚构写作大赛), held, among others, by the Beijing Love Hometown Cultural Development Centre, an organisation under the auspices of the Centre for Rural Construction of Renmin University. In an introduction to the prize, Zhang Huiyu articulated the concept of nonfiction as intrinsically collective, because it is more accessible to ordinary people to recount their experiences, talk about their own life, and express their feelings. “Employing nonfiction to write about one’s own experience,” Zhang argued, writers can “effect a turn from a ‘silent majority’ unable to speak out into a subject able to use the letters and other forms of rational language to express themselves” (借助非虚构来讲述自己的经验、身边的故事，从无法发声的“沉默的大多数”变成可以用文字等理性语言来表达自我的主体). This is particularly true, Zhang continued, for what concerns the depiction of the countryside.<sup>15</sup>

It is helpful to recall Li Yunlei’s remark that nonfiction relies heavily on individual experience and allows for a different use of literature, that, if we were to integrate Li’s position with Zhang’s argument, can be made more “democratic,” while simultaneously highlighting social issues faced by its writers, often (but not always) with lower-class origins. Li includes the genre of reportage literature in his wide notion of nonfiction writing, but does not fail to point out the significant differences separating contemporary *feixugou* from the historical *baogao*.<sup>16</sup> The problem here is also that *baogao wenxue* is at times used interchangeably with *feixugou* broadly, as well as *koushu jilü wenxue* 口述记录文学 (oral literature) and *jishi xiaoshuo* 纪实小说 (novel recording

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present failure, and so on. Freedom, love and dignity are, on the contrary, “fictional” (*xugou* 虚构). I think it is safe to assume that Xiaohai has been inspired to write this poem by the insistence put by PLC lecturers on the concept of literary nonfiction (Xiao Hai, “Feixugou”).

<sup>15</sup> Zhang Huiyu, “Zuowei gonggong xiezu.”

<sup>16</sup> Li Yunlei, *Xin shiji “diceng wenxue,”* 204.

facts). Nevertheless, evoking reportage literature is actually useful for the purposes of the present discussion, because the methodological tools it offers allow for a more rigorous contextual reading of Li Ruo's nonfiction, revealing interesting parallels and connections with reportage literature not strictly as a genre, but rather as a practice and a tradition. In his fundamental *Chinese Reportage*, Laughlin traces the evolution of *baogao wenxue* from its historical sources in travel literature and the critique of journalism, to its amalgamation as a distinct genre, with its distinctive ways of giving a faithful representation of reality, and soon strongly connected with left-wing cultural circles and, later, the socialist state itself (as well as the CCP before the PRC was established). Laughlin particularly insists on the literary nature of reportage writing: verisimilitude and adherence to reported facts did not disqualify the literariness of reportage, since "it is precisely in the verbal/artistic construction of the event (even if actual) that the writer imparts the tendentious message to it."<sup>17</sup> In other words, reportage writers made themselves visible by conveying certain emotions, bestowing symbolic significations on single events, spaces and environments, or shifting emphasis (among other strategies). The narrator becomes an essential "sensory and emotional medium"<sup>18</sup> for real experiences, and irony, an aesthetics of concreteness, and sensory elements are parts of the craft imported from fictional technique.<sup>19</sup> While none of this hindered the faithfulness of their reportage, it also separated it from a mere, almost self-explanatory recording of factual events as they unfolded.

After the 1980s, reportage literature gradually lost its most marked literary (and political) commitments to increasingly become more of a kind of sociological investigation, which contributed to its terminological rebranding as nonfiction literature,<sup>20</sup> particularly after 1986, when

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<sup>17</sup> Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 273–276.

<sup>20</sup> Moran, *True Stories*, 136, 161–162.

scholars Wang Hui 王晖 and Nan Ping 南平 imported the term from US literature and adapted it to the Chinese context. Nonfiction, however, is way broader as a concept. Song Xueqing 宋学清 operates a distinction between “historical” nonfiction, concerned with past events and especially with uncovering features of the past that usually go overlooked in official histories, and “reality” nonfiction, more akin to classical reportage. The latter, he continues, concerns the “subalterns” (*diceng* 底层) by definition, and she lists some worker authors as representatives of this batch of nonfiction, including Xiao Xiangfeng’s 萧相风 *Cidian: nanfang gongye shenghuo* 词典：南方工业生活 (*A Dictionary: Industrial Life in the South*) and even Zheng Xiaoqiong’s *Nü Gongji* 女工记 (*Stories of Women Workers*), a collection of poems written after a long survey she undertook to investigate the lives of women workers in the Pearl River Delta.<sup>21</sup> By 2010, with the “consecration” of a dedicated column in the authoritative *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 (*People’s Literature*),<sup>22</sup> postsocialist nonfiction had decisively replaced reportage. From this double historical perspective, contemporary nonfiction compels a rethinking of the role of the investigator, not rarely (but also not always) an urban-educated scholar who goes back to the countryside in order to document it, like in the famous and often-quoted case of Liang Hong’s 梁鸿 *Liang zhuang lie* 梁庄列 (*Liao Village Series*).<sup>23</sup> Li Yunlei suggests that nonfiction places a stronger emphasis on individual experience as the starting basis to carry out an investigation into the author’s “small world” (一个“小世界”的内部), as opposed to reportage, which sought to reduce the palpable presence of the individual and discuss the greater problems of society.<sup>24</sup> Zhang Huiyu stresses again the literariness of nonfiction, pointing out that it is one of its three key features, together with journalistic value (in representing

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<sup>21</sup> Song Xueqin, “‘Feixugou’ de lilian.”

<sup>22</sup> Song Xueqin provides an overview of the many journals that, before *Renmin wenxue*, had already started dedicating substantial room to nonfiction since 2006 (*ibidem*, 55).

<sup>23</sup> Chambers, “The ‘Liang Village Series.’”

<sup>24</sup> Li Yunlei, *Xin shiji “diceng wenxue,”* 208.

actual facts) and social value (its investigation of reality); literariness, in his opinion, materialises in nonfiction authors employing elements proper of fiction, including specific narrative techniques, plot construction and the author's subjective view.<sup>25</sup>

Li Ruo, then, can be fully ascribed to contemporary practices of nonfiction writing, intersected with 20th-century *xiangtu* literature: she returns to the countryside (after leaving it for labour migration), and creates a network of contacts or informants, often her family members and friends. Her social and personal identity makes of her not just a reporter or a witness, but a person who has personally endured the experiences she is describing, and who is directly involved in the social logic underpinning them. In this sense, her depiction of the countryside and rural-to-urban migration is more objective and multifaceted than that of nonfiction writers of intellectual background, who end up reducing these experiences to pure sufferance.<sup>26</sup> Her *xiangtu* writing can be considered a form of what Fan Boqun 范伯群 calls “urban *xiangtu*” literature, i.e. a form of narration focuses on the material and emotional impact of the city on individuals coming from the countryside, who see the social relations in the urban space through the lens of the rural mindset they carry with them, particularly the subtle and imperceptible ways through which this process takes place.<sup>27</sup> However, Li Ruo also displays some significant differences from these previous urban *xiangtu* writers.

## 7.2. *Xiangtu* poetry

Although generally overlooked in the commentary, poetry forms a relevant part of Li Ruo's oeuvre, not only due to its strictly artistic accomplishments, but also for what concerns the

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<sup>25</sup> Zhang Huiyu, “Qingting taren,” 18.

<sup>26</sup> Song Xueqin, “‘Feixugou’ de liliang,” 59.

<sup>27</sup> Fan Boqun, “Lun ‘dushi xiangtu xiaoshuo,’” 53.

characteristics of her rural writing. Her book, *Buguniao de tijiaosheng*, opens with a poem, “Fuping” 浮萍 (Duckweed), written in July 2013, roughly a year after her second arrival to Beijing. The piece, quoted in full below, can be considered somewhat of a programmatic poem of hers:

我是漂泊的浮萍  
没有方向的顺水前行  
因你无法扎下根去  
一阵风就会吹的无踪无影  
我是漂泊的浮萍  
但我没有孤单悲伤的独自前行  
白天有一朵朵倒映在水中的白云与我相伴  
夜晚有星星月亮看到我的向往  
当我们汇聚在一起的时候  
也是一道赏心悦目的美丽风景

I am a floating duckweed  
floating with the stream towards nowhere  
because you can't plant your roots  
a blow of wind will sweep your footprints and shadow  
I am a floating duckweed  
but I don't walk on my own alone and grieved  
white clouds reflected on water keep me company during daytime  
the moon and stars watch my yearning at night  
when we blend together



it's a breath-taking landscape<sup>28</sup>

Floating duckweed (an image employed also by Fan Yusu), lack of direction, rootlessness and anomie, solitude, or rather an evasion from solitude, again, are common sights in contemporary workers' poetry. The roots of this imagery are actually much deeper, as Lu Xun already used to refer to displaced individuals as floating duckweed, a tradition carried forward in the literary realm, among others, by Wang Anyi 王安忆 with her novel from 2000, *Fuping* 浮萍 (*Floating Duckweed*, with the original pinyin in Howard Goldblatt's translation), which narrates the vicissitudes of women moving to Shanghai from the countryside in the 1950s.<sup>29</sup> In the last four verses, the melting of the writing subject with poetry itself, evoked through such typical poetic figures as the white clouds, the moon and the stars, foreshadows the fusion between "I" and "We," the individual and the collective (or class), found elsewhere. But the poem is programmatic also because it includes some rhetorical devices that were to become central in Li Ruo's poetry, including the intimate relationship with nature, with the use of natural (or also artificial, inanimate) elements as metaphors for emotions and feelings, like the "cabbage with a cold" (感冒的白菜) or the "brick gone crazy" (疯狂的砖头).<sup>30</sup> The most accomplished sample of this style comes with "Xin minnong" 新悯农 (New Lament for Peasants), written by Li Ruo in April 2017 (when "Wo shi Fan Yusu" was about to be published). The title draws from the *minnong* 悯农 poems of the Tang period, i.e.

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<sup>28</sup> Li Ruo, *Buguniaio*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Fan Boqun, "Lun 'dushi xiangtu xiaoshuo,'" 50.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, 102, 100. Another example worth citing for its nuanced construction comes from "Mutong yu luhui" 木桶与芦荟 (Wooden Barrel and Aloes), where the menial act of doing a laundry reveals an undertext concerned with a more abstract emotional recollection: "his hand doing the washing / cannot wring the water out of the clothes / while drying it out in the sun / drop after drop it falls / like tears / falling down from the clothes" (他一只手洗衣/拧不干衣服里的水/晾晒时/一滴一滴/像衣服流出的眼泪; *ibidem*, 145).

compositions sympathetic towards the plight of farmers, inaugurated by Li Shen 李绅 in the 8th century CE. In her poem, Li Ruo creates multiple layers of meaning by connecting one central element, a string of figures that gradually lose their semantic link with the element to relate more to the author's feelings, and the author's explicit yearning, probably the motivating force behind the penning of the poem. Here follows the poem's first stanza as an example:

一包过期的尿不湿

被随地丢弃

那得多少棉花啊

雨露

阳光

白发

妈妈，我心疼棉花

也心疼你

a box of expired diapers

casually thrown away on the ground

ah, how much cotton does it have

and rain and dew

and sunrays

and white hair

mama, I so love cotton

I so love you<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, 147.

From a formal point of view, “Xin minnong” is more representative of Li Ruo’s poetic production than “Fuping”. Li Ruo’s poetry tends to be formally bare, sometimes pending towards everyday writing (*richang shuxie* 日常书写) or list poetry, counterbalancing the richness and complexity of the message. This choice of form, however, gives poetry a fast-paced rhythm and seems consistent with Li Ruo’s aesthetic sense, which favours concreteness more than other more abstract poems. “Guxiang” (Hometown) is an example of this style, as well as one of Li Ruo’s most interesting *xiangtu* poems:

昨夜

我又梦回故乡

躺在儿时睡觉的小床上

带着满身疲惫

生活的累

感情的伤

厌倦了

鞋厂的胶水味

电子厂的流水线

夜班

加班

颠倒的作息时间

我将身体缩小

再缩小

如同一个初生的婴儿

妈妈

请你用襁褓

把我包裹起来

从头到脚

只有躺在你的怀里

我才能睡得安稳

Last night

once again I was back home in my dreams

I lay in the small bed where I would sleep my childhood sleeps

my body covered with exhaustion

the weariness of life

the wound of sentiments

I'm fed up with

the stench of glue of shoe factories

the assembly line of electronics factories

night shifts

working overtime

inverted times of work and rest

I make my body shrink

and shrink even more

like a newborn baby

mother

please, wrap me up

in swaddling clothes

from head to toe

only in the embrace of your bosom

can I sleep peacefully<sup>32</sup>

“Guxiang” is arguably one of Li Ruo’s most fascinating poems overall. The dream emerges not only as an alternative to reality, but also as a form of homecoming. Home, in turn, is made equivalent with past and childhood. Such past appears so distant and evanescent that must be reconstructed by the dreamy, unconscious mind, which also remakes it idealistically, and in an explicit opposition with the actual present as a migrant worker working in the city. At the same time, this nostalgia is not purely a matter of personal longing for an age long gone. It is motivated by Li Ruo’s social condition as a labourer exhausted by work on the assembly line, which takes its toll not

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*: 23. In “Guxiang”, a central role is played by the bed, also the protagonist of another of Li Ruo’s arguably best-crafted poems, “Tuoguang le, shui ni” 脱光了，睡你 (Undressed, Sleeping with You). In the poem, Li Ruo imagines a conversation with her own bed, constantly thanking it for going through the pains of sustaining her exhausted body every time she lays down on it. In the end, Li Ruo declares her intention to “sleep with” her bed, playing with the words to subtly imply sexual intercourse (subtlety here is also embodied in the unlikely partner). The foremost characteristic of the poem is that the bed is not only anthropomorphised, but also rendered into a *worker*: Li Ruo thanks it not only for consoling her and for being always there for her, but also for physically bearing her weight and never complaining about its tasks (*ibidem*, 49). Secondly, the catchy title and the ambiguity between actual sleeping and sexual intercourse immediately calls into question Yu Xiuhua’s famous “Wo chuanguo le ban ge Zhongguo qu shui ni” 我穿过了半个中国去睡你 (I Crossed Half of China to Sleep with You), which likely inspired Li Ruo (the comparison is noted also by van Crevel, “Debts”). In terms of content, however, Li Ruo’s poem resonates more with “Chuang” 床, by the worker poet Wu Xia 郜霞, where she, calling herself “a temporary resident of this single bed” (这张单人床的暂住者), describes the bed in a very similar fashion, as embracing and observing her *dagong* life (Wu Xia, *Diaodaiqun*, 10).

only on the body, but also on the mind (“the weariness of life / the wound of sentiments”). It constitutes, as Hutcheon puts it, “less a matter of a simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealised history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present.”<sup>33</sup> It is not that the social space of the countryside is more ideal than that of the city, but the extreme frustration with the latter motivates a partial idealisation of the former. This is precisely the reason why “Guxiang” should be read as a *xiangtu* poem, and not simply a rural poem: it is the memory of the native land, evoked by the very word *guxiang*, to play a central role here, further associated with childhood, family, security.

In this sense, “Guxiang” should be approached in its relation with other similar poems by Li Ruo’s to investigate how nostalgia is not treated naively or unproblematically in her works.<sup>34</sup> The troubled relationship with reality reappears in “Fan” 烦 (Pissed Off), where the dream, however, while indeed helping to escape from the pains of the present (忘了现实), seems unable to conjure up any comforting memory of an imaginary past. An unaltered confrontation with reality awaits the poet as she wakes up (接着面对现实), and she, while struggling with a headache (apparently a physical reflection of the existential stasis), melancholically concludes that she cannot find any sense in everyday life, made of “jobs impossible to handle / trains impossible to catch” (没处理完的工作/追不上的火车).<sup>35</sup> It is in “Qiangpiao” 抢票 (Snatching Tickets), however, that the circle closes, and for this reason, the poem should be cited in full:

离过年还远呐

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<sup>33</sup> Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern,” 195.

<sup>34</sup> With this discussion, I also hope to rectify some imprecise assumptions I have previously made about Li Ruo’s use of nostalgia, which have proven unsatisfying and incomplete at a further scrutiny (Picerni, “Strangers in a Familiar City”).

<sup>35</sup> Li Ruo, *Bugunia*, 80.

大家回家的心动了  
一大早爬起来  
坐在电脑前  
等着放票  
八点一到  
赶紧刷票  
屏幕上一个小圆圈转啊转的  
票没了  
这什么破网速  
看到有票就是抢不到  
同事骂骂咧咧走了  
第二天一早  
又接着抢票  
我也加入抢票大军  
才突然想起  
我要去哪里  
一个无家可归的人  
跟着凑什么热闹  
对着异乡的空气  
冷冷地笑

New Year is still far away  
but everyone's [already] excited of going home  
getting up early in the morning  
sitting in front of the computer

and waiting for tickets to be realised  
at eight sharp  
hurriedly clicking on the ticket  
a small circle rolls about on the screen  
no more tickets left  
what a bloody internet speed  
I've just seen the ticket and yet can't grab it  
the colleague leaves swearing  
the next morning  
it's a new rush for tickets  
I also join the ticket-snatchers army  
but then I think all of a sudden  
where shall I go  
[I'm] a person with no place to return to  
what frenzy was I thinking of joining  
coldly I smile  
at the air of a strange land<sup>36</sup>

“Guxiang”, “Fan” and “Qiangpiao” were written in January 2016, October 2016 and January 2016 again, respectively, a close proximity in time that makes any claim of a gradual evolution in Li Ruo’s aesthetic treatment of hometown, return and nostalgia untenable. The circle is, on the contrary, thematic, and sees the simultaneous coexistence of apparently contradictory sensations. If “Guxiang” imagines a return, although purely illusory and in dream, “Qiangpiao” is pervaded by the sense of loss and estrangement usually found in non-literary personal accounts and in ethno-

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 22. The poem was also included in the first volume of *Beipiao shipian*.



sociological surveys of rural-to-urban migrant workers in China. “Qiangpiao,” therefore, makes visible an impasse that is only partially palpable in “Guxiang,” but which is there as well.<sup>37</sup>

### 7.3. Rural reportage

If poetry captures Li Ruo’s relationship with her hometown (and the present “strange land”) on a more psychological plane, her nonfiction presents a compelling snapshot of the material reality of rural areas. The spatial dimension of Li Ruo’s nonfiction is another element that draws her close to the tradition of reportage literature. Laughlin underlines that “the *literary construction of social space*” was a central tenet of classical reportage literature (before the 1980s). He adapts the concept of social space from Lefebvre’s theories (while also amply integrating it with the Bakhtinian chronotope), and therefore sees social space as both the process that produces the spatial environments of human activity, and the literary (or artistic) representation of these environments. Such representations, Laughlin observes (consistently with what he considers the literariness of reportage, as discussed above), while relying on subjective perception, “are not passive reflections of these environments but play an important role in the production and reproduction of social space itself.”<sup>38</sup> Diao Keli 刁克利, musing about postsocialist nonfiction, stands on a similar line of reasoning, asserting that “The place where the author is located precedes, accompanies and follows

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<sup>37</sup> In another poem, significantly titled “Bian le yang de guxiang” 变了样的故乡 (Hometown Has Changed), Li Ruo recalls herself returning home and describes her distress at witnessing the tremendous change occurred in her home area, which she explicitly describes as unrecognisable from her childhood memories, and focusing in particular on the drying out of nature. Starting from the title itself, the poem is *xiangtu*-Luxunian from top to bottom. It also arouses stylistic interest, being built in a circular way, with the first stanza being also the closing one (*ibidem*, 27–28).

<sup>38</sup> Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage*, 29.

the writing (写作前、写作中与写作后) of the work.”<sup>39</sup> Drawing on the social conditions and relations of these spaces, Li Ruo’s rural nonfiction is constantly focused on three categories: women, the left-behind (i.e. the elderly and children), and what I group under the broad category of the destitute (the sick, the lunatics, the mentally ill, former workers no longer able to work). Not rarely, a single individual belongs to more than one category. The latter category is unified by a sort of social abjection determined both by prejudice and by their inability to perform any function in existing relations of production (agricultural and industrial alike), and this abjection occasionally involves also the other two groups, suffice it to think of new-born girls abandoned or killed to evade family planning and obtain one (or one more) son.

“Ba ge nongcun laojia de zhenshi gushi” 八个农村老家的真实故事 (Eight True Stories from Home) is one of the earliest stories of this kind. The piece, penned in August 2016, was written under the solicitation by Central Party School professor and PLC lecturer Liu Chen that group members write more about their hometowns, and it was also first published on *Renjian*. The story presents many features that were to remain typical of Li Ruo’s nonfiction, namely the usual division into chapters following individual stories under a unifying theme, and a declaration of factuality (*zhenshi* 真实). Moreover, “Zhenshi gushi,” just like many other stories, is written from the perspective of a Li Ruo back home for Lunar New Year, who records what she sees or hears around her. The incipit is relevant in that it clarifies the geographic and social setting of the story, particularly emphasising, with the reference to labour force, the function played by social relations, as suggested above:

我的老家在河南南边，与湖北接壤，属于大别山区。

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<sup>39</sup> Diao, “Wenxue zhi zhen,” 102.

如今，农民靠田地致富已非常艰难，按照老家人的说法，累死发不了财。大部分年轻人背井离乡出外打工谋生活，留守的都是老弱妇孺，没有几个真正的劳动力。

My hometown is located in the southern part of Henan, at the border with Hubei, and belongs to the Dabie mountain area.

Nowadays, it is extremely difficult for peasants to get rich from farming. Like fellow countrymen use to say, you can work yourself to death and yet be unable to make any money. Most of the young people have left the countryside to work in the cities and make a living out of it. The old, the weak, the women and the children are the only ones who have stayed behind, and there is no true labour force.<sup>40</sup>

The story is divided into eight “sub-stories,” each of which is tragic in its own way, portraying a countryside hardly definable as an idyllic, albeit imaginary, place. “Zhongtian de gushi” 种田的故事 (Story of Farming) tells the grim reality of having only old people plough and harvest the fields, and a child, left unattended, accidentally drinks pesticide and dies. Similarly, in “Liushou de gushi” 留守的故事 (Story of the Left-behind), another “calamity” (惨剧) occurs when an old man burns the straws in his field forgetting (due, it is implied, to his advanced age and overwork) about his grandson, who had gone there to play and had fallen asleep, who dies. Another old farmer dies in “Kanbing de gushi” 看病的故事 (Story of an Illness), after he ignores symptoms of a condition that eventually results in brain haemorrhage, because in the countryside, comments Li Ruo with bitter irony, “if you can walk, then [that means] you’re not sick” (只要还能动，就不叫病). In “Guafu de gushi” 寡妇的故事 (Story of a Widow), Li Ruo’s brother-in-law dies of cancer, depleting the family’s savings on the eventually vane treatment; fortunately, his family moves to Zhengzhou and helps the now widowed sister to find a job to keep on grooming their three children, but she is left with a life of loneliness, because no one would take a widow with so many children to

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<sup>40</sup> Li Ruo, *Bugunia*, 50.

care after. “Ling yi ge kanbing de gushi” 另一个看病的故事 (Another Story of an Illness) follows the thread of the previous “episode”, but this time the ill, Li Ruo’s uncle, survives, also thanks to a new policy of state insurance which is openly praised; however, uncertainty looms, due to the meagre savings at the uncle’s disposal, that may become insufficient once he is no longer able to work. In “Dubo de gushi” 赌博的故事 (Story of Gambling), Li Ruo offers a detailed representation of a gambling club held at her friend’s home, particularly focusing on the desperation and hypocrisy of losers who ruin themselves by keeping on borrowing money. “Ling yi ge dubo de gushi” 另一个赌博的故事 (Another Story of Gambling) concentrates on just one player, who aims always higher, until fortune turns against him and he has to use the family savings, but he is found and humiliated by his wife after she returns home from the city, where she was working, and the two eventually divorce. Finally, “Yanglao de gushi” 养老的故事 (Story of an Elder) is the piercing account of the vicissitudes of an old lady, who is “passed over” among different members of her family in the city after her husband’s death and her insistence to return home, until she dies following an accident with boiled water, although it is implied that she is already emotionally destroyed.<sup>41</sup>

All eight stories are ordinary accounts of common people, but Li Ruo also makes use of distinct techniques to impress literariness upon them. Such techniques are present throughout her nonfictional production, starting with the strong visuality of her narrative, that often portrays landscape in a vivid way: “All around the fields, it is only the elderly who work, kids sit on the ridges separating the fields, playing with the mud or catching grasshoppers” (四处看，田野里都是老人在干活，小孩坐在田埂上玩泥巴或是捉蚂蚱).<sup>42</sup> Li Ruo also tries to distance herself from journalistic reportage by polishing the structure of her stories, for example through the anticipative overture of the second gambler’s story: “I didn’t know Lao Cao’s complete name, I just knew his

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 50–58.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 50.

surname was Cao” (老曹本名叫什么不知道，只知道他姓曹).<sup>43</sup> Similarly, some endings are left deliberately vague, either reinforcing the nonfictional plot or leaving a sense of bitterness for a social phenomenon that does not close with the story, like in this example from the first gambler’s story: “Boss Li had lost more than a hundred thousand. He didn’t even bat an eyelid, imperturbable and cold as always. He collected his bag, and left with a smile” (李老板输了十多万，依然沉着冷静面不改色，夹着提包，笑咪咪地走了).<sup>44</sup> Bitter irony is another rhetorical strategy employed by Li Ruo, although not that frequently. Her sarcasm does not betray the ostensible superiority of an urbanite looking down on a backward region, but rather hides an indictment of social problems. A subtle instance comes when Li Ruo writes of the ill who refuse to get their health checked to continue working: “Village people said that Lao Wang was fine, and that he died healthy. Isn’t it that you don’t even know that you’re sick if you don’t get yourself checked?” (村里人都说老汪头身体好好的，没病就死了。因为不体检，有病也不知道吧).<sup>45</sup> Evidently then, social issues are indeed what foregrounds Li Ruo’s stories. Money is prevalent in this case. Farmers develop health problems and lose children because they have to overwork, cannot get cured because they are poor, and then dive into gambling. While the social logic behind this (the relations of production determining the production of social space, to follow Lefebvre) is not made explicit, the structural force interfering with individuals’ agency can be inferred.

Individuals-characters play a specific role that can also be understood better at the light of reportage tradition, where “meaning is generated from character precisely from the ability of character’s externally observable qualities to suggest something more general, such as a social group or a historical trend.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the people Li Ruo chooses to portray in her accounts,

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*: 52.

<sup>46</sup> Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage*, 216.

spanning a wide spectrum of affective proximity to her (from family members to complete strangers), are meaningful also, or precisely, because they can suggest something about their socio-historical condition. “Fuqin zuihou de shiguang” 父亲最后时光 (Father’s Last Moments) is a case in point. In it, Li Ruo tells of her time attending to her father, who is terminally ill. Different moments of her taking care of him, for example feeding him or standing by his side, propel flashbacks into her own childhood and her father’s presence or absence back then. These trips back in personal time, however, are also journeys backwards in history, and the epochal changes of life in the countryside can be spotted there, too.

Sensory experience becomes the narrative method through which the memories of these episodes—and history—are evoked. Specific acts, like feeding her father or holding his hand, function as narrative triggers of flashbacks back to Li Ruo’s time as a child, when those same acts (feeding, holding hand) were performed on her by her father. For example, a bowl of dumplings brought in by an aunt compels Li Ruo to think back to when the material destitution she experienced as a rural child. An apple that her father brought her after it was given to him on the occasion of the opening of the (presumably local) party congress is an element through which her father as an individual and the history of the countryside are juxtaposed:

那苹果青青的皮上有白色的小点点，放鼻子下闻，那苹果还带着父亲的体温。咬一口又香又甜，那是我贫瘠的童年吃过最好的水果

The green skin of that apple had some small white spots. Smelling it under my nose, I could still feel my father’s warmth. Its fragrance and sweetness filled my first bite. That was the best apple I ever ate during my barren childhood.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Li Ruo, *Bugunia*, 36.

Although environment occupies only a marginal role in this story, unlike many other pieces of Li Ruo's, there still are some descriptions of the exterior conditions of the countryside at the time (like a bridge with no railings), but the focus is markedly on its social dimension, which also includes an insight into her father's allocation as a government office clerk following his discharge from the military ("he lazed about at a government office for a time"; 赖在政府某机关不走). In the ending, Li Ruo's final recollection is about her sadness when seeing her father leaving home to go to the hatchery to buy ducklings, and her joy in seeing him return. "But I wasn't absolutely willing to believe that now father was really gone, never to return" (可我怎么也不愿相信, 父亲真的走了, 再不回来了).<sup>48</sup> The ordinary story of Li Ruo's relationship with her father thus assumes a more general importance. It is the tremendous changes occurred in the countryside from the 1970s that are mirrored in the figure of the father, who appears, together with the writer-narrator-investigator, as a witness of this changing rural history. "Father was now an entirely different person from the one he was back then" (现在的父亲和那时早已判若两人):<sup>49</sup> This assertion may therefore be read in its socio-historical implication, with the father not only mirroring, but even embodying rural history.

Individual stories likewise become a vehicle for a sense of fatalism, which is not distant from the one experienced by Fan Yusu (see chapter Four). While fate and fatalism recur throughout Li Ruo's oeuvre, they can maintain a key position in "Liushou nannüxing luanxiang" 留守男女性乱相 (A Mess of Left-behind Men and Women). As the title implies, the story, developed along the usual pattern of four distinct chapter-anecdotes, is an account of rural "dew couples" (*lushui fuqi* 露水夫妻), i.e. extramarital affairs conducted by people who have remained home while their husbands or wives have migrated to cities. The perspective is interesting, because usually it is migrants' affairs in the city to be represented in fictional and nonfictional accounts alike. Perfectly

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, 38.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, 37.

aware of that, Li Ruo justifies her choice as deliberately producing a counternarrative, although she presents it not just as her personal opinion, but rather as common sense prevalent among peasants:

贪官可以找情人，在外务工的男人女人可以做临时夫妻，就不兴留守的女人男人做露水夫妻？要烂，大家一起烂。” 村里人都这么说。

“Covetous officials can have their lovers, men and women working outside [in the cities] can become temporary husbands and wives, and only left-behind women and men are not allowed to form their own dew couples? If we must rot, let’s rot together,” villagers would say.<sup>50</sup>

Moral judgement is absent (except for the ironic reference to rotting away together in lasciviousness); if anything, there is only a looming sympathy. As mentioned, there are four chapters: “Baogongtou he majiangnü” 包工头和麻将女 (The Labour Contractor and the Majiang Girl), “Liushou xifu he jixiao nanhai” 留守媳妇和技校男孩 (The Left-behind Wife and the Vocational School Boy), “Liushou funü he zhuangjxiugong” 留守妇女和装修工 (The Left-behind Woman and the Renovation Worker), and “Zong xiang yi ye baofu de lao Peng, xiao yizi he zhanjienü” 总想一夜暴富的老彭，小姨子和站街女 (Lao Peng, Who Had Always Wanted to Become Rich in One Night, the Sister-in-law and the Streetwalker). Each of the four stories develops according to a similar scheme: the two main characters are introduced, and their motivations for starting their relationship are laid out, usually involving lonely women having to overwork in order to care after the land and children. Their affair—or the visit to prostitutes in Lao Peng’s case in the last story—is eventually uncovered. How this discovery is narrated varies from one story to another, sometimes inserted in a linear plot that goes from A (the affair) to B (the discovery) to C (the ending), other times more nuanced, with the narrator witnessing a sudden

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 59.



family crisis and only later learning about the reasons for it. When this happens, characters' reactions, in one way or another, tend to conform to the prevailing social order, which is therefore preserved, albeit not in an identical fashion as before.

In two cases, namely the first and third stories, the cheated party resigns to their fate and decide not to divorce. They do not find the courage to do so in the first case, or are convinced by others in the latter. In both cases, the nominal couple is preserved. However, the endings of the stories uncover the distress caused by this decision. The labour contractor's cheated wife "came back sobbing and crying, but she didn't dare divorce. She stayed home for a while, then went back to Beijing, alone" (他们说秀秀回来就哭哭啼啼, 又不敢离婚, 在家耗了没多久, 自己又只身上北京了); while the third story's left-behind woman's cheated husband "did not brought up divorce again. Although he was not happy, he still had to carry on" (阿伟不再提离婚的事儿。虽然心里不舒服, 可是日子还得过下去呀).<sup>51</sup> In the second story, the left-behind wife eventually leaves her husband and stays with the vocational school boy, but the "happily ever after" is only apparent here, because the two are moved by the boy's consideration that his reputation is now stained and would have a hard time in finding a wife. Only the last story is slightly different, since Lao Peng's affair comes after he is left by his second, younger wife (his first wife's sister—hence the sister-in-law of the title), and he tries to hook up with prostitutes, but the attempt only procures him a wound since he accidentally walks over a nail; this fact, however, in spite of its purported verisimilitude, adds a note of tragedy to man's destiny.

The collective feeling that can be easily inferred from these stories, although never stated explicitly, is one of inescapability from the structures (and overstructures) of society. Investigating the meaning of melancholy in Liang Hong's rural reportage, Chambers makes the point that "feeling is articulated in a relation between the material environment and one's position within a

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, 60, 62.

whole social form.”<sup>52</sup> In Li Ruo’s case, and not only hers, the underlying social logic emerges in the form of “fate.” Fate emerges implicitly in “Liushou nannüxing luanxiang”, with characters who chose to resign themselves to the prescriptions of social order, and quite more explicitly in another works, chiefly “Na xie ming ru caojie de nühai” 那些命如草芥的女孩 (Girls of a Fate like Grass and Mustard Leaf), a cold, detached and intense observation of the plight of little girls abandoned or killed by parents who prefer a son. The countryside emerges as a place that allows little agency for its inhabitants, especially when they are weak or vulnerable, at the mercy of events and conventions (including gossip). Clearly, fate is then the materialisation in feeling of an objective condition, perhaps coupled with the difficulty of imagining an alternative not just theoretical, but feasible in speaking subjects’ lifetime. By no means is Li Ruo herself oblivious to the material truth that glitters in the interstices of individuals’ emotions, and she reveals a strong lucidity in exposing class disparity as the material basis for this condition:

想来，大部分农村人得了癌症就是等死，他们总觉得人与人命不同，这不能怪谁？但是这真的只是命吗？这世上有的人挥霍无度，而最勤劳的农民辛苦节省了一辈子，面对疾病只能等死；这世上有权力有资源的人占用甚至浪费医疗资源，而普通农民连最基本的医疗保障都没有。这不是命不同，是社会就是如此的不公平！

If we think about it, when they get cancer, the majority of people from the countryside do nothing but just wait for death. They always believe that different people have different fates, who’s to blame for that? But is this really just a matter of fate? In this world there are people who can afford to splash out their money, but peasants—the most hardworking of all—have to spend their lives breaking their backs and just saving money, and when they face sickness, the only thing they can do is wait for death. In this world people with power and money occupy and even waste all medical resources, while

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<sup>52</sup> Chambers, “The ‘Liang Village Series,’” 277.

common peasants don't even have the most basic health insurance. This has nothing to do with different fates, it's society that is unequal to this point!<sup>53</sup>

Accepting the value of individual experience for a more general understanding situates Li Ruo's nonfiction within the tradition of reportage literature in terms of the questions it posed. So does a discussion on the author's role in mediating the experiences she writes about. Mediation was an essential tenet of reportage literature, which has persisted in postsocialist nonfiction as well.<sup>54</sup> The core of the problem lies in assessing to what extent the narrator-investigator is mediating the people he or she is supposedly giving voice to, impressing his or her consciousness upon cold facts and interpreting them according to his or her point of view. The old spectre of ventriloquism is haunting nonfiction, too. Li Ruo, on her part, also claims a "representative" function for herself as she states, referring to her fellow villagers/informants, that "Their life looks like a corner forgotten by everyone else. As a someone who has personally experienced all that, I wish to document their condition—their life, their character, and their dignity" (他们的生活，就像是在被人遗忘的角落。作为一名亲历者，我想记录下他们的状态——生活、性和尊严).<sup>55</sup> Her claim to be not just a witness, but someone who has experienced what she is talking about, is important, because, in a way, separates her from authors who write about peasants—and the popular classes in general—without having first-hand, personal and direct knowledge of their situation. In fact, as opposed to high-brow authors of reportage and nonfiction, Li Ruo is not separated from the people and environments she writes about due to her own social origin and, above all, identity.

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<sup>53</sup> Li Ruo, *Buguniao*, 150. It is interesting to recall that, according to Mao Dun, *xiangtu* literature of the 1920s and 1930s was "the portrayal of what he refers to as the peasants' 'struggle with fate'" (Haddon, "Chinese Nativist Literature," 109).

<sup>54</sup> Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage*, 144, 199.

<sup>55</sup> Li Ruo, *Buguniao*, 67.

Such a claim alone, however, does not guarantee immediacy. It can be argued that a certain degree of mediation will always be there, and that mediation is precisely one of the things that confer literariness to nonfiction. Despite the common social basis, Li Ruo is talking about *others*—although she also writes a piece about her own life experience, “Qiong haizi de xuefei” 穷孩子的学费 (Poor Children’s School Fees). She is telling their stories, and, while not interpreting them, it is she who decides what narrative strategies to employ, and those strategies inevitably convey certain messages. Moreover, she does not hide that, at times, she feels separated from her fellow countrymen. Sharing her 2017 Lunar New Year experience back home in “Chunjie fanxiang biji” 春节返乡笔记 (Notes from Spring Festival Homecoming), Li Ruo does not conceal her astonishment in seeing that everyone is busy trying to buy a flat in town, despite the abysmal costs. This clearly connects with Li Ruo’s wider interest in portraying rural areas’ increasing depopulation and urbanisation, which she also does by describing the changes in the environment:

小区中间一条水泥路，两边是刚建的房子，大概有十来排，两排房子之间间隔四五米。

这个地方原来是农田，现在还能看到有的房子旁边种有菜。

[...] 老人们都说这个地方之前是山，山上有很多坟，开发商用挖掘机全部挖平整，盖成了一套套房。

An asphalt road crossed the neighbourhood, flanked on each side by newly-built apartment blocks. There were maybe ten or more rows, with a space of four or five metres between each building. This place used to be fields, and now you could also spot the vegetables growing on the sides of the buildings.

[...] Old people say it was all hills here in the past, and there were many tombs on the tops. With the arrival of development, these hills have been completely levelled by bulldozers, and they have built flats in their place.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, she has discussions with her relatives who want to buy flats in towns, and it is poignant to note how Li Ruo describes her own point of view being dismissed as that of an urbanite, excessively idyllic compared with the harsh reality of low rural income, which emerges from her brother's apparently more rational arguments:

晚上回来，我问弟弟，“为什么要在镇上买房呢？村里有田有地，青山绿水，养几只鸡鸭，自己种点菜园不是挺好的吗？”“姐呀，那是城里的有钱人过的生活，回农村养老，种一点菜园、住两间小屋，到月有退休金，想买什么买什么，不靠种田地生活，旱涝保收当然轻松惬意。农村人就不一样，没有经济来源，指望种田地挣钱生活，多累多辛苦，夏天毒太阳，晒得满头大汗，还要在田里干活，地里刚刚拔完草，下一场雨，草又疯长……”

Back home at night, I asked my brother: “How come you want to buy a flat in town? Here at the village you have got lands, verdant hills and blue water, you can grow chicken and ducks. Isn't it fantastic to farm your own land?” “Oh, sister! That's the city wealthy's life: You go back to the country once you've become old, farm a little land, live in two small houses, and get your retirement money at the end of the month. You don't have to live off the land, so of course you can take it lightly, you don't have to worry if something goes wrong. It's not the same for peasants. We have no financial resources, have to count on the soil to earn some money and get a living. It's hard and painstaking. You have to work under the sun in the summer, and keep on tending to the fields also when your head

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, 125–126.

is covered in sweat. And then, when you've just finished pulling up weeds, it starts raining, and everything's a mess again..."<sup>57</sup>

The passage is compelling not only because of the brother's words, that leave Li Ruo speechless and suggest a triumph of the rationale of capitalist "developmentalism" over other, more challenging possibilities (which Li Ruo keeps suggesting him, like starting a farming cooperative), but also because Li Ruo implicitly admits her subjective distance from her "informants." This way, she suggests to the reader that she is not making herself invisible in the narration. Both the author's distance from described events and individuals and the (in)visibility of her or his conscience were thorny issues of traditional reportage, too. Elsewhere, Li Ruo's personal epiphanies on described phenomena or people's behaviours situate her closer to the reader than to her characters.

Extracting moral lessons from stories is also an example of Li Ruo's active distancing from a mere recollection of facts. She does not set herself on a moral higher ground, but tries to find meaningfulness also in the deeper layers of her accounts. Respecting the usual pattern, "Chunjie fanxiang biji" is also structured along six unrelated stories, mostly focusing on the ordeals of left-behind children and on the difficulty of finding a partner for men and women alike (after all, Spring Festival is also the perfect time for matchmaking, or *xiangqin* 相亲). In the final story, "Douzhe ren tuiqin" 逗着人退亲 (Forced Break-off), we read about her younger cousin Jingjing 晶晶, who struggles with a cutaneous condition that makes her lose hair. She finally finds a man who ostensibly sees no problem with that. She later goes to work in Guangzhou, and the two almost lose contacts, until he abruptly asks her to marry him, naturally causing her refusal. However, her family has to return all the money spent on the perspective groom's family side for premarital arrangements. This of course causes distress and resentment in Jingjing's family, and Li Ruo tries to intervene:

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 126.

我只好好言相劝：“婶子，像这样的人你敢和他做亲戚吗？你敢把晶晶嫁给他吗？别说吃一万块钱的亏，就是倒贴一万块钱都要把这门亲事退掉。放心吧，吃亏是福，你忘了当年我大弟还差三天结婚，小姑娘跑了，那不也吃两万块钱的亏吗？后来我大弟娶了一个多好的媳妇儿。

I could only be tactful: “Aunt, would you ever want to become relatives with such people? Would you ever let Jingjing marry him? Forget about having to bear the loss of ten thousand *kuai*, you would have had to break off this arrangement even if you had wasted ten thousand *kuai*. Take it easy, suffering some losses is a blessing. Have you forgotten that back then my brother’s girl fled three days before the wedding? Didn’t we lose twenty thousand *kuai*? But later my brother married a very decent girl.”<sup>58</sup>

The “moral lesson” here, assigned to her own direct speech in a sort of narrative honesty, is diametrically opposed to the overpower of money displayed, for example, in “Ba ge nongcun laojia de zhenshi gushi.” On a more general level, an ethical standpoint rising above the mundane and material, but also defying the “fatal” resignation to the social order, is also what can be found in the ending of “Qiong haizi de xuefei,” Li Ruo’s autobiographical account of how, after her family pigs died of swine fever, she could not collect the money needed to pay her own school fees and had to drop out. Much space in the story is dedicated to her own anguish for having to leave school, with a terribly emotional scene of her walking away in tears. In the final paragraph of the story, it is Li Ruo herself who becomes a moral parable:

记得在一个冬天的晚上，我上街买东西，一位中年父亲扛着一个大蛇皮袋，一个八九岁的小孩儿跟着他亦步亦趋，当走到一个烧饼摊儿前孩子不走了，喊着要吃烧饼。不知道那位父亲是没

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 133.

有钱还是不给买，硬拉着小孩走，小孩眼瞅着烧饼撕心裂肺地哭喊：我饿了，我要吃烧饼我要吃烧饼……

看到这一幕，我再也忍不住，冲上前去买了两块钱的烧饼送给他们父子。不是我有多菩萨心肠，而是我受不了那种哭声，仿佛看到我当年的影子，永远忘不了那十几里路一路洒下的泪水，这一生再也没有流过那么多的泪。

I remember a winter night, I was buying stuff outside when I saw a middle-aged father carrying a big nylon bag. An eight- or nine-year-old boy was following him obediently. When they reached a stand that sold fried pancake, the boy stopped, crying he wanted to eat pancakes. His father forced him to move, maybe because he didn't have money, or perhaps just didn't want to spend it, I don't know. Being dragged away, the boy kept his helpless eyes on the pancakes and cried in grief: I'm hungry, I want to eat pancakes, I want to eat pancakes...

Seeing this scene, I couldn't bear it anymore, so I hurried over, bought a two-*kuai* pancake, and gave it to them. It's not that I'm so kind-hearted and compassionate, but I couldn't bear the sound of that cry. I could almost see my own shadow from back then. I will never forget the tears I spread on that road of several tens of *li*. I won't ever be able to shed that many tears again in this lifetime.<sup>59</sup>

It should be pointed out, in passing, that this conclusion is partly reminiscent of the closing lines of “Wo shi Fan Yusu,” equally concerned with an empathy based on one's experience. Within Li Ruo's nonfictional endeavour, the moral lesson walks away from bare factuality and is one of the constituting factors of her authorial originality. The extraction of moral lessons; stylistic choices; narrative strategies—which include irony, sarcasm, fatalism, awareness of social relations, contrasts, uses of language, emphasis on certain characteristics over others, environmental descriptions, detachment of proximity—that arouse sympathy, indignation or engagement; plot construction; and

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, 165.



the higher meanings attributed to characters and events, it is also what makes these texts more strongly *literary*.

#### **7.4. What is urban about this?**

Li Ruo's nonfiction is important as a repository of ethnographic documents *and* from a narrative point of view. Members of her family and other peasants she writes about evokes crucial questions about what it means to live in rural areas in China today, about the changing identity of peasants, and above all about the plight and real life of the left-behind. In these accounts, Li Ruo often appears as a stupefied narrator, carrying a surprised gaze which is, probably, made up at least in part, to stress the verisimilitude of the stories she tell by exorcising their apparent absurdity, but also to portray the countryside as a social space crossed by highly asymmetrical relations of power.

While the exposition above has hopefully intercepted some of the questions posed in the opening, namely how Li Ruo connects to and develops the historical literary tradition of *xiangtu* and reportage, it remains to wrap up the discussion on how urban these writings are. Undoubtedly, the vast majority of them is not urban due to the location of the stories. However, if we borrow from Lefebvre an understanding of the "urban" as a city-centred mode of society and production, more than an adjective denoting what belongs to the city, then Li Ruo's rural nonfiction and *xiangtu* poetry are urban at least in two aspects. Firstly, they refer to a situation which is the mirror of the city and it is intimately connected with the city in terms of economic infrastructure and social relations. The forgotten stories of the left-behind, in fact, complement those of migrant labourers; Li Ruo's focus on left-behind children, for example, completes Fan Yusu's on floating children. Secondly, at the moment of writing, Li Ruo sees things from the perspective of a rural-to-urban migrant. The city often appears in her rural nonfiction as a distant place where people tend to vanish, or is implied as the unsatisfactory present she wishes to dream away from in her poetry. But

concretely, the city is the place where she writes and publishes, which has separated her from everyday contact with the countryside, while also producing new experiences for her life. Her *xiangtu* writing then simultaneously connects to and separates her from the “urban *xiangtu* novel,” primarily because she is barred from full identification with the city, and her lack of sense of belonging is particularly prominent in her *xiangtu* poetry. Yet, when she writes reportages about the countryside, the subtle imprint of her urban experience on her consciousness is incontrovertibly displayed.

This interpretation can also help us explain how it is possible that the recollection of an idyllic rural past in poetry and the exposure of all-but-ideal rural social relations in nonfiction, two evidently divergent approaches, can coexist in the same author. The reason is to be found in the fact that the rural memory conjured up through poetry is mostly an imaginary alternative to the unsatisfactory urban present, strongly mediated by personal emotions, and mixed up with sweet memories from Li Ruo’s childhood. Conversely, nonfiction explores the naked, factual reality of the countryside, and it does so from the point of view of a woman who no longer lives permanently in that social space. In sum, then, Li Ruo’s rural accounts, in the forms of poetry and nonfiction, are seen from the perspective of an urbanised migrant worker, sustained by a contemporary working-class rethinking of categories central in other literary traditions of the 20th and 21st centuries.

***Chapter Eight.***  
***Fictive and Factual in Workers' Autofiction: Wan Huashan***

The discussion so far has concentrated primarily on the subject-matter and content of works under analysis, advancing a perspective on how they conveyed their authors' social experience as migrant workers and interacted with extratextual factors and conditions in their unique voice. In this final chapter for part II, the focus will shift to a matter of method: by resorting to the resources of narratology, it will investigate how one specific migrant worker writer, Wan Huashan, handles the craft of narrative construction, i.e. form, and the starkly different effects these different approaches produce for what concerns their narration of experience. How writers handle the craft, so to speak, technically, does not only reflect their talent or their ability to master the rules of the art. A narratological analysis of their formal choices can be extremely telling of the effect they want to obtain on the reader, and, ultimately, of the message they wish to convey.

The intimate relationship of workers' prose with the real-life experience of its authors apparently comes at the expense of fiction, in favour of reportage and factuality. The discussion on nonfiction in Fan Yusu (chapter Four) and Li Ruo (chapter Six), however, shows that elements of narrative strategy usually found in fiction have been employed also to construct nonfictive stories. The genre, however, remained nonfiction, even when supplemented by techniques borrowed from fiction. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate examples of workers' prose that are not based on a recollection of real events in the author's past, but that are elaborated as fiction. Within the framework of the aesthetics of experience that governs our analysis of worker literature in general, fiction is likewise addressed starting from its relationship with the author's life, even when it does not handle real events.

Following a premise on the uses of narratology, the chapter will concentrate on the prose by Wan Huashan, a prominent member of the PLC, as its main case study. The choice to analyse Wan's production is motivated by this writer's evident intention to distance himself from the narration of events from his own real life as they were, in favour of an attempt to create stories with fictional characters, settings and events. While some of these stories clearly draw also from his private and social experience as a migrant worker, others do not. In addition, this endeavour has also led the author to experiment with other styles than realism, the predominant genre in worker literature overall. All these elements make Wan's production extremely interesting in terms of the relationship between fact and invention in workers' fiction, especially the way real-life experience is camouflaged by fictional elements, but not erased altogether, considering that the situations and references employed in such fiction are evidently based on the author's life and contain messages aimed (also) at a migrant-worker readership.

### **8.1. Narratology and the problem of workers' (auto)fiction**

Narratology is the discipline that studies narrative structures and the way they impact, influence, or direct readers' perception. It purports to study the functioning of the literary text by dissecting it, laying bare the rules and strategies of narration, and distilling them according to precise, scientific categories. Crucial elements in the analysis of narratology include narrating time, narrative level, perspective, diegesis, empirical and implied author and reader. In other words, it is concerned with how the author organises her or his text, the distance she or he maintains from it, the level of direct intervention on her or his part, the intended effect on the reader, and so on. Gérard Genette, one of the foremost theorists of narratology, summarises the purposes of the discipline as follows:

A narrating situation is, like any other, a complex whole within which analysis, or simply description, cannot *differentiate* except by ripping apart a tight web of connections among the narrating act, its protagonists, its spatio-temporal determinations, its relationships to the other narrating situations involved in the same narrative, etc.<sup>1</sup>

Even more crucial is the distinction between the two fundamental planes of story and discourse (or narrative), which is evidently indebted to the tradition of Russian Formalists (who used the terms *fabula* and *sujet*) and to the interpreting tools of structuralism, in particular to the distinction between *langue* and *parole* in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (*Course in General Linguistics*). While *parole* concerns the linguistic act between at least two communicating individuals within the premises of a certain linguistic code, and therefore the concrete instances where the code is practiced, *langue* involves the code itself, or the structure of signs or norms that subjects have largely interiorised and which makes the process of *parole* possible in the first place. Similarly, in narratology, story has to do with the fundamental, material, "real" elements that predate (and, in turn, make possible, or call for) their representation in literature or in any other form, like characters, settings, and events. Temporally, it follows a natural chronology. Discourse (or narrative), on the other hand, "comprises a number of functions, including addressing the reader, interpreting characters and events, and testifying to the narrator's own authority."<sup>2</sup> It is, in other words, the way the raw materials of the story are arranged in a certain way by the author, employing the specific techniques made available by the narrative text, which also involves several devices to displace the progression of narration from the story's natural chronology and follow the twists and turns preferred by the author.

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<sup>1</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 215.

<sup>2</sup> Foley, *Radical Representations*, 266.

On the level of discourse, Genette identifies three essential categories: tense, mood and voice. Tense involves the temporal relations between the discourse (or narrative) and the story, like the use of flashbacks and flashforwards. Mood concerns the modalities, forms and degrees of narrative representation, or the way in which narrative itself builds the discourse, primarily distance and perspective, which involve speech (direct, indirect, etc.) and focalisation (the point of view from which the story, or segments of it, are told), with all their alterations. Finally, voice concerns the relationship between the narrator and her or his audience, real or implied (the varying role of the narrator *vis-à-vis* the author and the narratee, which can be shortened as diegesis). While this sketchy summary is based on the “three basic classes of determinations” elaborated by Genette,<sup>3</sup> not only is each of these categories way more articulated internally, but they can also be organised according to different configurations. Genette himself admits to have been inspired by Tzvetan Todorov’s classification according to tense, aspect and mood,<sup>4</sup> while Seymour Chatman prefers a division of the domain of discourse in narration, focalisation and temporal organisation.<sup>5</sup> For his part, Umberto Eco reelaborated his previous systematisation in his *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* to further divide the domain of the discourse between *discourse* and *plot*, where *plot* encapsulates the devices normally assigned to discourse (temporal displacements, speech, perspective, etc.), while *discourse* refers to formal interventions of the implied author, including the level of diegesis.<sup>6</sup>

Narratology has been also interpreted (or misinterpreted) as an effort to explain the totality of the text exclusively through the analysis of form and technique. In pondering about the gains of narratology (and its “sister discipline” semiotics), grouped together in a more general discussion on

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<sup>3</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Chatman, *Story and Discourse*.

<sup>6</sup> Eco, *Sei passeggiate*, 41–45.

structuralism, Eagleton particularly welcomed its “remorseless *demystification* of literature,”<sup>7</sup> made possible by its exposition of the extremely concrete tools in place to construct the narrating text, as opposed to abstract conceptions revolving around the subjective “genius” of the individual author. The author is therefore freed from any aura of ontological exaltation and returned to the more mundane dimension of a craftsman who masters precise techniques to convey a certain message. At the same time, Eagleton questions structuralism for dislocating the sign from the object, an operation “which allows the sign a certain independence as an object of value in itself,” and for losing sight of literature as “a form of *production* which was not exhausted by the product itself[.] Structuralism could dissect that product, but it refused to enquire into the material conditions of its making.”<sup>8</sup> But narratology does not have to be formalistic at all costs, nor exclusively technician, in the sense of elevating the technical above the historical. Its tools can be indispensable to dissect the inner operations of storytelling, and can be integrated within a wider analysis that puts together “strategic” and “tactical” elements in analysing a text. After all, Genette himself recognised that “the role of the analyst is not to be satisfied with the rationalizations, nor to be ignorant of them, but rather, having ‘laid bare’ the technique, to see how the motivation that has been invoked functions in the work as aesthetic medium.”<sup>9</sup> And motivation, inevitably, involves the multi-layered questions of ideology studied, perhaps most prominently, by Eagleton.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, analysing a work of literature—novel or poem—also requires a methodology adequate to interpreting its formal workings; even parts of ideology can be better understood through a deeper exploration with a

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<sup>7</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 92.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 85, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 158.

<sup>10</sup> Eagleton, *Criticism & Ideology*.

rigorous methodological compass. Different methodologies can be critically combined if the objective of inquiry is clear.<sup>11</sup>

The question remains about the actual degree of desirability of a narratological approach to read Chinese workers' literature. Two potential problems manifest themselves here: first, there is an extremely limited amount of fiction, as opposed to poetry and nonfiction, particularly in the PLC. Liu Dongwu, far more interested in poetry, dedicates some pages of his massive study to fiction, but he is mostly descriptive there. He also points out that non-migrant-worker authors produce fiction regarding migrant labour way more than migrant labourers themselves, due to the fact that this social reality has become so pervasive that writers from other social backgrounds simply cannot ignore it.<sup>12</sup> Second, the dominant understanding (as seen in chapter Two and in the discussion about Fan Yusu in chapter Four) sees worker literature as heavily message-based, underpinned by the author's real-life experience, which counterbalances the rawness or perceived insufficiency of form. In addition, many worker authors have not received any literary training, apart from personal readings, which inevitably impacts their technical proficiency. (Here one might also add that narratology developed in the European academia is heavily based on the linguistic structures of the major European languages, and cannot be blindly applied to the Chinese context.)

The former problem is easily workable: the fact that there is not a vast amount of fiction, compared with other genres, in no way prevents us from analysing the body of fiction we have available, even if it is limited in number and in formal accomplishments. The latter question can actually be turned from problem into possibility: the centrality of experience in the aesthetics of working-class cultural production compels us to expand our attention also to techno-formal craft to

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<sup>11</sup> For what concerns workers'/proletarian literatures, Foley's *Radical Representations* and Cai Xiang's *Revolution & Its Narratives* are two prominent examples of studies that attempt to combine a social-critical reading of texts with their technical analysis by means of narratology.

<sup>12</sup> Liu Dongwu, *Dagong wenxue*, 74.



see in what way the experiences of author, narrator and heroes/main characters (when distinct from the narrator) intermingle, juxtapose to each other, or are purposely kept separated, and why. And finally, the possible “immaturity” of form cannot be assessed in advance, but, if we are interested in reaching such a conclusion at all, will have to be ascertained through an analysis of the formal characteristics of texts themselves. And in any case, an “immature” form does not mean that authors are not unconsciously using technical tools that have received a codification in narratology.

The strong presence of lived experience still compels to rethink the relationship between fiction and nonfiction. In particular, if we are not content with the postmodernist statement that “fact is fiction,”<sup>13</sup> if we persist in believing that the distinction between the two does make sense, we need to reach an understanding of the difference between these fictionalised accounts of lived experience, on the one hand, and autobiography, on the other. In the work of PLC writers, fiction constantly ends up at the liminality with nonfiction, and not rarely steps into it, more or less intensely. It is probably inevitable, given the real-life implications of the subject-matter. Even when this trespassing occurs, however, the text does not give up the tools of fiction: the most vivid example is probably direct speech, used extensively in the works scrutinised in this chapter, but entirely absent, for instance, in “Wo shi Fan Yusu” (Li Ruo, however, makes vast use of it in her nonfiction). Manipulation at the level of discourse is also a way to differentiate fiction from nonfiction, although several more refined nonfictional works also employ technique that narratology would include in the realm of discourse. Here we see why the problem of liminality is not merely taxonomic, but also operative: does a text remain fiction when it trespasses into nonfiction?

A possible solution is offered by the resources and the definition of *autofiction*. According to Jacques Lecarme, autofiction is “a narrative in which the author, the narrator and the protagonist

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<sup>13</sup> Lackey, “Introduction,” 2.

share the same nominal identity and in which the generic title indicates that it is a novel.”<sup>14</sup> As opposed to the autobiographical pact delineated by Philippe Lejeune, according to which the author promises “to give a detailed account of his or her life, and of nothing but that life,”<sup>15</sup> the autofictional pact is “contradictory,”<sup>16</sup> since the author makes no commitment to convey the objective truth, or rather reshapes real facts for narrative purposes, inserts fictive episodes or removes factual ones, invents direct speeches, guesses or makes up characters’ thoughts, streams of consciousness, and so on. The result is a retrospective and fragmentary narrative, which, counter to traditional autobiography, privileges non-linearity over natural chronology—here again we are reminded of discourse and story in narratology.<sup>17</sup> Autofiction also stands in direct opposition to autobiography in temporal and social terms: while autobiography is generally penned later in life and has been historically reserved to upper-class individuals or figures who have played some role in historical events. Autofiction lends itself to be used by people in any moment of their existence to register their experiences, to which they attribute some valour, as opposed to other events upon which value is conferred by institutions or the public: as remarked by Siddhart Srikanth, it “is more accommodating of the manifold traces on the self that inform our everyday identities.”<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, what governs our reading “is not the frame of actuality, but that of relevance.”<sup>19</sup>

Although autofiction is generally characterised as the conflation of author, narrator and protagonist, the author of autofiction can narrate themselves also in relation to their significant other or others, that can be fictional, but also nonfictional, or, again, a conflation of the two. In fact,

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<sup>14</sup> Lecarme, “L’Autofiction,” 227. Cited and translated from the original French in Just, “The Autobiographical Provocation.”

<sup>15</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 11–12.

<sup>16</sup> Lecarme, “L’Autofiction,” 242. Cited and translated as *supra*.

<sup>17</sup> Just, “The Autobiographical Provocation,” 612.

<sup>18</sup> Srikanth, “Fictionality and Autofiction,” 349.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 347.

although autofiction generally sees the author as the protagonist of fictional events (thus enabling a certain type of psychological exploration into the self and testing the relationship between reality and fiction), an issue arises when the author, the narrator and the protagonist do not exactly have the same identity. The author may choose to create entirely different characters to tell her or his story, even when those characters, or other elements of the story—places, personal names, events—clearly refer to the author’s life. The boundaries of autofiction have traditionally been understood as flexible, and it would seem impossible to do otherwise, given the shared presence of lived reality and imaginative (ir)reality in it. Srikanth points out that autofiction fundamentally complicates our understanding of what is fictive and what is not, particularly by exposing the fact that what the way we conceive of the fictive is based not on ontological categories but on dominant conventions.<sup>20</sup> The more the autofictional work privileges fiction, for example by choosing a third-person narrative, or even a first-person narrative from a character who is not mimetic with the author (even a fictional character), or also through rigid extradiegesis, the more it does so, it loses referential immediacy, requiring a stronger involvement of the reader to understand that it is not entirely fiction (in other words, the reader must use other sources to learn that the story told here is the story of the author). By doing so, however, the work also establishes itself as proper fiction based on Dorrit Cohn’s influential argument that fiction is not bound to real-world accuracy.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the more the autofictional work privileges delves into its nonfictional aspects, the more its referential nature becomes manifest, despite its continued usage of rhetoric and formal resources typical of fiction.

To square the circle, narratological tools help supplement this discussion by shedding light on the motivations behind the author’s choice of a certain way to write her or his story, or episodes of it, by uncovering the effect produced by the technique. We have just mentioned, for example, the key importance of focalisation: Genette observes that the autobiographical narrator, “whether we

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 352–353.

<sup>21</sup> Cohn, “The Distinction of Fiction.”

are dealing with a real or a fictive autobiography,” tends by definition to be “more ‘naturally’ authorised to speak in his [*sic*] own name than is the narrator of a ‘third-person’ narrative.”<sup>22</sup> Precisely for this reason, the author’s predilection for one option over another requires further reflection. The author may be looking for ways to make the perspective used in her or his autofiction the less objective as possible, as to reinforce its fictional value, for example by privileging heterodiegesis (external narrator) and extradiegesis (narrator not part of the story). In the context of worker literature and its aesthetic of experience, it may also imply an active effort to extract more general meanings from her or his limited individual experience.

A final consideration should be spent on the dimension of workers’ fiction. It has already been extensively shown how poetry has been the privileged form for proletarian expression since the early 20th century, especially thanks to its relative brevity, which helps both production and fruition. Novels require a much greater investment of time and energy. The need for brevity, largely motivated by objective circumstances, has caused a prevalence of the form of the short story, or *duanpian xiaoshuo* 短篇小说. The novella, or *zhongpian xiaoshuo* 中篇小说 (literally middle-size novel), follows. Only a few full-length novels have been produced, the most famous being Wang Shiyue’s 王十月 *Wu bei* 无碑 (*No Monument*). The earliest prose texts of China’s postsocialist worker literature as short stories or novellas as well, like Lin Jian’s “Yewan, zai haibian you yi ge ren” (mentioned in chapter One) and “Bieren de chengshi” 别人的城市 (*City of Others*) and Zhang Weiming’s 张伟明 “Xia yi zhan” 下一站 (*Next Stop*), “Dui le, wo shi dagongzai” 对了，我是打工仔 (*Right, I’m a Migrant Worker Boy*) and “Women INT” 我们INT (*Us INT*). The PLC, in particular, has not produced any novel yet. This can be rapidly assimilable to two tropes of the Chinese critique concerning workers’ literature: on the one hand, it may be a sign of immaturity, since today writing short stories is generally perceived as an exercise of style or experimentation or

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<sup>22</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 198.

early-stage probing ventures into a topic later to be developed into a full-length novel. On the other hand, it reinforces the return-to-the-origins mystique around the aesthetics of migrant workers' literature (see particularly chapter Two, although the point appears also in the commentary on Fan Yusu in chapter Four), because it would be impossible not to think of Lu Xun and how he only wrote short stories and novellas in his life.

But there is more to it, of course. Brevity is not the end of the story, and in principle it does not prevent literary quality. In his “Lun duanpian xiaoshuo” 论短篇小说 (On the Short Story), Hu Shi argued that the short story was “the most economic literary style” (最经济的文学手段), which “describes the most exquisite segment or side of reality while leaving readers fully satisfied” (描写事实中最精采的一段，或一方面，而能使人充分满意).<sup>23</sup> This thesis relies on the assumption that literature should relate to the outer social reality, but it also definitely fits in workers' literature, and helps demonstrate that the historical dignity of the short story. Indeed, short stories have also inaugurated important literary phenomena of post-1980s Chinese literature, like Liu Xinwu's 刘心武 “Banzhuren” 班主任 (Class Leader) and Lu Xinhua's 卢新华 “Shanghen” 伤痕 (Scars) launching Scar literature, or even Cao Zhenglu's “Na'er” setting the ground for subaltern literature. And to conclude, the predominance of short stories in workers' literature needs to be analysed in context. The objective factors motivating brevity, for example, are founding traits of workers' literature as a whole, and the short story may as well be the most defining form of its prose.

## 8.2. Real life exposed and camouflaged

Wan Huashan is a charismatic personage, whose character, deep literary knowledge, acknowledged quality of writing (*vis-à-vis* his non-prolific production) and much-needed skills as

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<sup>23</sup> Hu Shi, “Lun duanpian,” 139.

editor have rapidly led to becoming one of the leading figures in the PLC. All these traits clearly emerge from “Wo gaozhong chuoxue, dagong shinian, rujin dangshang wenxue zazhi zhubian” 我高中辍学，打工十年，如今当上文学杂志主编 (Quit High School, Worked Ten Years, Now I’m the Editor-in-Chief of a Literary Journal), a lengthy autobiographical account he published on 8 October 2019 for the “Zipai” 自拍 (Selfie) website. The latter position of editor-in-chief derives from his role in the *Xin gongren wenxue* journal (see chapter Three). In spite of what the title may suggest, this piece has nothing of the usual story of an individual migrant’s success in China’s neoliberal market. It is interesting also for how it is carefully construed from a literary point of view: to make a comparison, while personality exudes from Xiao Hai’s “Confessions” in a raw and spontaneous way, Wan is clearly using specific techniques proper to literary writing (last but not least, humorous interpretations of illustrated facts) to recount his life narrative.

Wan Huashan was born on 3 January 1989 in southwest Henan. His family had gentry roots from the Qing dynasty, and his grandfather allegedly attended the Whampoa Military Academy. Following the trajectory of many of his rural peers, he left school to work in the fields, then took the *dagong* road in 2009, at 20, and moved to Dongguan. The harsh description of the wearing rhythms of the assembly line and the accidents due to fatigue echo that of other workers, but what is new here is the feeling of strong estrangement from other male workers; while we have already encountered such an estrangement in the accounts, for example, by Xiao Hai and Xu Liangyuan, Wan frames it in terms of failure to conform to the dictates of shopfloor masculinity, since he felt himself uncomfortable with their pranks and jokes. At the same time, he got along better with female workers, but failed to enjoy and actively seek after their company because he felt out of place with individuals of the opposite gender. He spent some ten years working around the Pearl River Delta, Zhejiang and Shandong, constantly changing factories and occupations, the only *fil rouge* being the feelings of solitude and alienation that conjured up the same sense of being a loser: “The lofty sentiments I had when I first left home wore completely away in those six years of

incessant hanging around. My ‘quiet night reflections’ made me realise I was a total loser” (当初离家时的豪情万丈被六年间兜兜转转的日子磨灭，静夜思之，我是一个一无所有的失败者).<sup>24</sup>

In this, Wan’s feeling resonate with Xiao Hai’s, and are indicative of a general mood in the generation of migrant workers born in the late 1980s (although this sense of unfulfillment can be found in other cultural instances produced also by middle-class individuals).

He was still able to make the best out of solitude, though. He continued to read avidly and started to write with increasing frequency. He published on his QQ account, and found great encouragement in the praise he received from friends and other readers. He had the habit of writing on his phone, citing lack of time and little skill with computer keyboards as the main reasons: in fact, he would write in the breaks from work, sometimes also reading while eating at the factory’s cafeteria.<sup>25</sup> Writing also motivated him to take the decision to move to Beijing, since his primary purpose was to enjoy and benefit from cultural life in the city. It was 2016. He first tried to work as security guard at Peking University’s main campus, but quit the job when he found out that security guards had no free access to the university library. He then started working at a library close to the university, which allowed him to go listen to classes held there after work. When his employer found out Wan also wrote things of his own, he was deeply impressed and eventually helped him land a job as editor, which he held for some months, until he moved to Picun in summer 2018 and continued as a freelance editor. He decided to live in Picun after coming in touch with a WeChat network of migrants from Henan living in the capital. Amongst them, he met Xiao Hai, who introduced him to the literature group in late 2016.

What makes this account peculiarly literary, in addition to highly informative, is above all its construction around what could be called, resorting to the actantial model of semiotics, an “object of value,” i.e. an element (or actant) that the subject wishes to gain in order to complete her or his

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<sup>24</sup> Wan Huashan, “Wo gaozhong chuoxue.”

<sup>25</sup> Interview in Beijing on 9 November 2019.

quest.<sup>26</sup> The model, while not limited to it, has been widely applied in the structural(ist) study of narrative, because it helps to frame a text according to a fixed schema that aims to identify the narrative roles played by each constituent/actor/actant. The object of value in Wan's autobiography is his "literary dream" (文学梦):

一方是乡间的野孩子，一方是循规的城里人。我始终想要寻求一个完满的自我，将二者融合，过上一种真正的有价值的生活，将文学梦与世俗生活真正地结合起来。为了这个理想，我仍在努力着。

On the one hand, [I was] a wild kid from the countryside, while on the other hand, I was a rule-abiding urbanite. I have always sought after a complete self that could melt those two identities together, to spend a life really worth of some value, to really bring together my literary dream and my mundane life. I am still working hard for this dream.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fact that the dream has not been fully attained yet, what concerns us here is the use of the "literary dream" object to build up the autobiographical narrative (*en passant*, also the distinction between a wild, unruly rural life and an urban life equated with lawful behaviour is interesting). Wan's casual encounter with books and his subsequent falling in love with reading, to the point that he would spare the little money he had to buy novels, is part of the introduction, but then the progression of the story (a non-fictional story, in this case) is constantly punctuated by the vicissitudes around the realisation of the dream. Life in the countryside is important in this respect not only for being the background of Wan's early infatuation with reading, but also for nurturing his creativity: "Nature has a kind of unbridled, free and wild beauty, which shaped my character and

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<sup>26</sup> Greimas, *On Meaning*.

<sup>27</sup> Wan Huashan, "Wo gaozhong chouxue."



my aesthetic views, nourishing my imagination” (大自然有一种无拘无束、自由野性的美，形塑了我的性格和审美观，滋养了我的想象力). However, his high school teachers diminished his writing skills and demoralised him, something that ultimately lead him to abandon his “writer’s dream,” with lasting effects: “I think that I suffered a strong emotional pain during high school, struggling between the pressures of formal education and the shattering of my writer’s dream” (我总觉得高中时，自己承受着很大的精神痛苦，在应试教育的压力和作家梦的破碎之中挣扎). The dream resurfaces in Wan’s motivation for undertaking a migrant’s life, not differently from the declaration of agency seen, for instance, in Fan Yusu:

放弃作家梦，服从应试教育的规则，安安稳稳地读个大学？或者彻底离开这里，用脚步丈量土地，成为一名真正的作家？最终，我选择了后者

Give up my writer’s dream, observe the rules of formal education, and attend a university as expected? Or leave for good, measure the land with my feet, and become a true writer? In the end, I chose the latter.

What is interesting here is also the dissociation between formal schooling and the pursuing of a “wild” path towards becoming a writer, the latter being implied as the only way to truly know the reality of life, as opposed to the unreal, encapsulated world of formal education. But Wan’s years as a migrant worker are all but about the realisation of the dream: “That hope I had for myself was grinded and pulverised time after time in the world of [social] subalternity” (我对自己的这种自我期许，在底层处境中一次又一次被碾磨成粉). As already mentioned, the dream motivates Wan’s decision to move to Beijing: “I would realise my writer’s dream, even if I had to sweep the floor and clean toilets to do so” (哪怕从扫地、刷马桶做起，我也要实现自己的作家梦). And finally, pondering on the last years spent in Beijing, Wan reaches an important but open conclusion: “In the

three years of my ‘northern drifting’, I have partly realised my writer’s dream, and I have planted my roots in this fortuitous job [as an editor]” (北漂三年，我部分地实现了自己的写作理想，并在这份偶然投入的工作中扎下根来).<sup>28</sup>

The pursuit of the literary dream reveals a strong awareness on Wan’s part of his own disposition as writer, not just as someone who writes casually and occasionally (a *xiezuozhe* 写作者), but as an individual who dedicates her or his life to the endeavour (a proper *zuoji* 作家). This vision is, at least in part, different from the imaginary figure of the worker writer, who produces literature while remaining in the social context—namely, her or his job and class—that provides her or him with the subject-matter and reference material for her or his “workers’ literature.” Wan explicitly refers to himself as a “free writer” (自由写作者—using the term *xiezuozhe*, probably out of modesty, but also because *zuoji* is associated with accomplishment and, possibly, considered a full-time occupation). Evasion from factory life and migrant labour are presented as essential elements towards the realisation of the dream, just like the abandonment of formal routes (education above all) and the accumulation of real-life experience.

The first piece Wan wrote as a member of the PLC was “Taiyangdao de yi ye” 太阳岛的一夜 (A Night at Sun Island). A short story, it was written as part of a “homework” task for PLC writing class attendants, which consisted in writing a story centred on a place. What he generated stood out of the group’s already fertile production not only because it was a piece of fiction, but also because it cannot be assimilated to the general lines of experiential realism usually found in PLC members’ oeuvre. It would be likewise incorrect to argue that the story is entirely divorced from Wan’s experience as a migrant labourer. Apparently in contrast with what was suggested just now, the opening lines delineate a type of narration not so distant from Wan’s peers in the group:

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem.*

机器在深夜里轰鸣，闷闷的、黏黏的。谁也不敢扯断它，一扯断就有危险发生，听着机器声，我们感到安全，虽然也烦闷

Deep in the night, machines were roaring, a muffled and sticky roar. No one dared to interrupt them, any interruption would bring about danger. Hearing the sound of the machines, we felt safe, although we also felt depressed.<sup>29</sup>

While the story is told in the first person, that is, in homodiegetic way, the plural pronoun in the opening lines conjures up a shared sensory experience of which the I-narrator is only the spokesman. The central element of such an experience—the sound of the machines—seems directly imported from previous examples of industrial literature, especially from the tradition of the 1930s: the most striking example is probably a piece of factory reportage by Ding Ling 丁玲, “Bayue shenghuo” 八月生活 (Eight Months of My Life), where machines appear as anthropomorphic, benevolent beings endowed with an autonomous life and all the characteristics that typically characterise workers as well: sweat, fatigue, feeding, etc.<sup>30</sup> In the positive vibe associated with the factoryscape in socialist literature, Cao Ming would even find a captivating musical lure in the metallic sounds of the factory.<sup>31</sup> In other case, although similarly made anthropomorphic, machines appeared more like monstrous beings, such as in Lu Ling’s 路翎 1942 novel, *Ji’e de Guo su’e* 饥饿的郭素娥 (*Hungry Guo Su’e*). Similar examples of industrial senses can be found in newer-generation postsocialist literature as well, for example in Shuang Xuetao’s 双雪涛 (b. 1983) “Wulai” 无赖 (The Rascal), which closes up with the quasi-hallucinatory scene of a concert of machines. In Wan, too, machines are animalised as roaring beasts, endowed with a powerful but detached force:

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<sup>29</sup> Wan Huashan, “Taiyangdao,” 318.

<sup>30</sup> Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage*, 139–141.

<sup>31</sup> Volland, *Socialist Cosmopolitanism*, 82–83.

the ambiguity is expected, because the industrial machines have long lost any positive connotation in their relation with the workers, and have rather become, in modern migrant workers' literature, symbols of exploitation and dehumanisation. It is also possible to infer a more polished language, distant from the plainly colloquial, which is also reflected on structural complexity.

The story follows eleven short chapters. With a few exceptions, the chapters are not clearly connected to each other, and appear more as isolated episodes or memories. The plot progresses by ellipses, that is leaps in the time of the story without specifying what happened in the lapse. The first chapter is a memory of the narrator's rural past, which ends with his father inadvertently hitting him with a rake. The second chapter is in the present, and opens with the narrator waking up after dozing off at the assembly line; the rest of the chapter describes his repetitive work and his anxiety when having to send back defective products for fear of bothering co-workers. The third chapter is introduced by the narrator's solitary habit to eat and sleep on his own while the other workers go have fun in Sun Road. This provides the opportunity for a description of the story's stage, particularly relevant given the story's strong spatial dimension:

三面山丘围着一块坦地，厂房像积木般堆砌的，在厂房跟厂房的中间，一块大空地，搭有两排白铁皮房，那就凑成一条商业街：太阳街。不知谁沾谁的光，他们都管这个工业开发区也叫太阳岛。

我在一座大城市，他们叫它世界工厂，但是我们住在山脚下，它被唤作太阳岛。拥忙的人流行走坐卧，在大小不等的积木盒里，不知疲倦的蚂蚁，也在寻找着人间遗落的面包屑。

我们可不是蚂蚁。我们在太阳岛，我们创造世界。

It is a piece of flat land surrounded by hills on three sides. The factory looks like a pile of banked up bricks. In the middle between two warehouses there is a big empty space, with two rows of iron

prefabs, put together to form a shopping street: Taiyang Road. I don't know who came up with it, but they all call this industrial development zone "Taiyang Island".

I am in a big city. They call it Workshop of the World. But we live at the bottom of the hills, and therefore the name was changed into Taiyang Road. It is thronged with busy crowds who walk and sit around, in brick boxes of any dimension, indefatigable ants, also on the look for the breadcrumbs abandoned by humans.

But we are not ants. We are in Taiyang Island, we create the world.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, the passage presents more than a mere description of the environment, and also introduces some social issues at the core of post-1978 working-class culture, namely the sense of marginality coupled with an heroic image of productive creation, partly an heritage of socialist cultural imagination. Also in terms of socialist culture, the image of the "sun" immediately evokes Mao Zedong, although here it is used in more general terms, i.e. as a symbol with positive connotations, here used ironically to name a place that is characterised as all but positive. For the purposes of the present analysis, it is important to point out that the environment, albeit fictive, clearly carries elements that can be considered experiential, i.e. the urban landscape and the industrial setting.

In the following chapters, the narrator finally meets Liu Ruyu 刘如雨, a beautiful woman worker at the centre of the dreams of many in the male worker dorm. She also likes books, but the narrator is unable to strike a conversation with her. He then stops under a tree, and the fifth chapter is entirely dedicated to his dream-like memory of a folk tale told by his grandmother about a ghost who would steal bad kids and turn them into worms. He is woken up by Liu Ruyu, and the two finally get to know each other (under the rain, *yu* 雨, obviously a pun to the girl's name, and an allusion to sexual contact), until they kiss. The kiss brings about another flashback, about the time

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<sup>32</sup> Wan Huashan, "Taiyangdao," 318–319.

when the narrator would hunt mud snails by hand. He is woken from the flashback by the girl, hurt by him holding her head too tight. Here we have a first confusing mix between the dimensions of the real and the dream, as well as present and memory: “I hastily let her go. There were no mud snails in her hair” (我慌忙放开她。她的头发里没有田螺).<sup>33</sup> The story continues with some isolated episodes (a road accident, a picnic at the apple tree field, women workers gossiping about Liu Ruyu) where the narrator increasingly shows signs of lunacy, until the last chapter, where all boundaries between real and unreal shatter: the train taken by the narrator to go back home derails, he survives but, as he tries to break the window to escape, he sees the faces of his co-workers on the other side ridiculing him: “Xiao Qiang, you jerk, go home and sleep, you’ve been fired!” (肖强，你个屌毛，回家睡吧，你被开除了).<sup>34</sup> It is implied that it was all a dream, and probably the window of the train only a projection of the glass barrier at his working position at the assembly line. The discourse proceeds by leaps, leaving considerable blank spots in the progression of the story. As a result, the reader gets lost in the narration and is catapulted in apparently isolated events, missing the cause-effect chain, reproducing the same disorientation of the protagonist.

Alongside the abundance in descriptions, the spatial emphasis on the industrial zone and the enigmatic pervasiveness of memories, what is particularly striking is the passivity of the I-narrator: in the very first two chapters, he is hit by his father and abruptly woken after dozing off during worktime. While he clarifies that he is not fond of visiting Sun Road, he is almost dragged there by a turbulent crowd moving in that direction, “like a dead tree branch pushed by the waves” (像一条被浪潮推涌的枯木枝).<sup>35</sup> He is often absent-minded, or not entirely on hold of what is going on, and the same sensation is passed on to the reader. His confusion when Li Ruyu takes him to a hill for a stroll, condensed in his baffled questions “Why did you call me? What time is it now? Where

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 320.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 323.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, 319.

are we?” (你叫我干什么呢? 现在是什么时间? 这是哪?),<sup>36</sup> is precisely the sense of absurdity and bewilderment Wan wants to instil in his readers. The zenith of this impotence occurs in the relation with girls: at first, the narrator is unable to start a conversation with Liu Ruyu even if they clearly share an interest. In the seventh chapter, the narrator goes to a library and is fascinated by the silhouette of a girl reading (and the rarity in women workers fond of literature is reiterated throughout the story, highlighting the special nature of the encounter), but she leaves before he is able to see her face. A similar mysterious figure reappears on the train, and again the narrator is unable to recognise her. While the train moves, the girl calls the passengers to look at the beautiful full moon outside, but only the narrator heeds, again implying some sort of communion based on a typical poetic symbol, frustrated not only by the narrator’s inability to recognise her, but also by the shattering of the idyllic figure in the very last sentence of the story: after the narrator is apparently brought back to reality, workers laugh at him, and among them “a girl was laughing so much that she almost dropped the green box on the ground” (一个女孩笑得差点把绿胶筐砸掉地上).<sup>37</sup> A final, bitter joke.

This lingering indeterminacy and passivity determine a lack of agency that stems directly from the subject’s (through the narrator’s) disidentification with other workers. Such disidentification produces, in turn, the estrangement of the subject from the environment he lives in, causing frequent escapes into memory and, more frequently, from reality altogether. In this sense, the story is strongly individual, projecting feelings and sensations that do not fit well with someone who willingly associates themselves with the class they belong to—in the final analysis, to class consciousness. However, this is not the end of the story. It has been shown how the plural “We” makes frequent appearances, and, most notably, such appearances coincide with descriptions of the wider condition (the sound of the machines, the space and landscape). Disidentification with co-

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 321.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*: 323.

workers does not seem to prevent the acknowledgment of their shared condition. Things are not merely binomial, then, and there is no simple opposition between self and collective, but both are further complicated in their interrelation from the perspective of someone who feels subjectively out of place.

There are clearly some elements of experience in the plot. The setting is transparent, and the estrangement experienced by the I-narrator is superimposable with that recounted by Wan Huashan himself in his autobiographical accounts cited above. The very choice of the first-person narrative is indicative, since, according to Genette, the I-narrator is “more ‘naturally’ authorised to speak in his [*sic*] own name than is the narrator of a ‘third-person’ narrative.”<sup>38</sup> In addition, Wan disclosed the fact that, after his years as a migrant labourer, he was convinced to dedicate most of his energies to pursuing his literary dream after he lost the strength to go on doing repetitive jobs, and his girlfriend. This double loss paradoxically relieved him of the social pressure he felt, through his self-identification as a “loser” (although the word he used, *yiwusuyou* 一无所有, literally indicates someone who has nothing at all, materially, but possibly also spiritually), and led him to take up writing again.<sup>39</sup> Both elements are vibrantly present in the story. The recourse to an expressive genre alternative to realism does not mimetically mirror real life, but neither keeps it out: in a way, it hides it in plain sight.

While sharing a clear separation from realism with “Taiyangdao de yi ye,” another story, “Sanmei” 三妹 (Third Sister), presents some significant differences. Written later than the previous short story, and published in 2018, “Sanmei” takes place in the countryside, and has no relation to any fact in the life of the author, although Wan commented that he drew his inspiration from a gruesome story of child abuse that he had heard from people at home.<sup>40</sup> The atmosphere of

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<sup>38</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 198.

<sup>39</sup> Interview in Beijing on 9 November 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Personal communication, April 2021.



narration is almost dreamlike, constantly pacing back and forth between sleep and waking, past and present, in a similar fashion with “Taiyangdao de yi ye.” The dominant aspect is the mystery of a life apparently undecipherable in the eyes of the protagonist. In this sense, it carries forward Wan’s attempt to produce a social narrative built not exclusively on realism, and sustained by clear narrative strategies.

The themes of migrant labour are inseparable parts of the story’s background. The “Sanmei”/“third sister” of the title, Xiani 霞妮, is a typical left-behind girl, the youngest child of a peasants’ family divided by migration. Her two older sisters and her parents are in the south working, and to add insult to injury, her parents finally realise their dream of having a male son, after which money for Sanmei’s school fees start dwindling. The third sister is left under the care of her sick grandmother. The story rapidly follows her growth, her meeting the boy she liked from school, and her dreams of flying free like a kite. The image of the repressed girl flying away from the countryside is greatly reminiscent of Yu Xiuhua, who uses a similar image in her poetry, often referring to herself. In both cases, flying is the projection of the unattainable desire to leave the oppressive social reality of the hometown on the part of an individual whose agency is curtailed.

Temporally, the narration (discourse) does not follow exactly the time of the story. The present time of narration (or the present “tense”) is all in one relatively short moment, which sees Xiani in the countryside as she hears a distant call getting closer and closer. It is implied, also for those who do not know the backstory, to be that of her assailant. The rest of the information on her life is given through flashbacks, or analepses: they do not contribute to the progression of the story in any way, but draw the contours of Xiani as a left-behind girl, thus showing the significance of the story’s social background. The rhythm is punctuated by the nearing of the call, getting more rapid towards the end. A scheme can be sketched out as follows:

Present time (time of the story): “‘Sanmei, Sanmei,’ someone was calling” ( “三妹，三妹”，有人叫), followed by a description of the present situation of Sanmei in the field, with no flashback. The present continues until the second call: “‘Sanmei, Sanmei,’ she heard a familiar raucous voice, carrying hope and coarseness” ( “三妹，三妹”，她听到一个熟悉的沙哑的声音，那嗓音带着希冀和干涩).

Analepsis 1 (time of the discourse): information about Sanmei’s family and childhood.

Present time: “‘Sanmei, Sanmei,’ the voice got closer, flicking like a gut of warm wind going through the cracks of sesame” ( “三妹，三妹。”那个声音近了一些，像一股热风透过芝麻缝隙拂来).

Analepsis 2: Sanmei’s relationship with her granddaughter, her growth, her puberty, her dream of flying away. An important moment in the analepsis is when Sanmei remembers waking up from a dream after falling down from her bed, and seeing mice crawling around the room’s window screen.

Present time: “‘Sanmei, Sanmei,’ that voice came again, with an autumn flavour” ( “三妹，三妹”，那声音再次转来，带着秋天的况味). There is no analepsis here, implying that the man is now close. Only a line separates this call from the subsequent, final one, and it is highly relevant: “Her parents were in the south. Her sisters could not be reached” (父母在南方，姐姐们联系不上). And then, the last call: “‘Sanmei, Sanmei,’ a huge body rushed through the sesame field”.

Confusion between present time and analepsis: The act of Sanmei opening her eyes in the present time is deliberately confused with her waking up from her dream and seeing the mice in her room in the second analepsis.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Wan Huashan, “Sanmei,” 522–523.

The representation of the threats harboured by the remote countryside for young girls, respectively the epitomes of the evil of society and the purity of the innocent, is not unseen in contemporary *xiangtu* literature. In particular, “Sanmei” inspires a mention of Yan Lianke’s 阎连科 short story “Qu ganji de nizi” 去赶集的妮子 (The Girl Goes to Market), where an innocent girl is likewise approached by an ill-intentioned older man on her way home from the country market, but is eventually saved by his sudden change of mind. The plot twist permits Yan to denounce that the real social threat comes from less immediately visible factors, like the material greed of perfectly respectable adults (as opposed to the indecency of the man who thought of raping her) who take advantage of the girl for their own interest. Unlike the linear plot progression and the social realism of Yan’s story, Wan’s is more psychological and structurally complex. The variations of the story’s temporal order are instrumental for the mixing memory and present: while everything builds up to Sanmei’s aloneness and lack of proper guardianship beside the old grandmother, which leaves her exposed to danger, the non-linear approach suggests a stronger emphasis on the persistence of the social (as well as personal) elements of Sanmei’s past in the tragic outcome.

“Taiyangdao de yi ye” and “Sanmei” are perhaps two of Wan’s most accomplished works that, to good reason, can be considered avant-garde in form and style. This trait, if confronted with the realism otherwise predominant in worker fiction, is indeed peculiar, and has probably to do with the early date when these stories were penned. Wan based his literary self-instruction on intellectual literature of the 1980s, particularly scar literature, and was fond of Yu Hua above all, who, as mentioned above, had a thriving avant-garde phase in his writing career. Wan asserts that for a long time he considered Yu Hua’s avant-garde production his main model for “pure” literature, until participation in the activities of the PLC made him change his vision in a fundamental way, broadening his understanding of what literature is (and can be).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Interview in Beijing on 9 November 2019.

### 8.3. Narration on the threshold of experience

In fact, Wan's writing has subsequently taken a more realist turn. The boundaries between fiction and nonfiction begin to blur, as personal experience becomes more and more manifest from between the lines. Wan's stories are populated with migrant individuals who struggle through life in the city, going from one job to another, less assimilable to factory workers and more akin to extremely precarious labourers, isolated and atomised, constantly threatened by cheats on the part of employers and facing impoverishment. Friendship and new affective ties in general emerge as instruments to overcome isolation. The relatively little space reserved for the factory is probably motivated by several factors, one of them being purely biographical, as Wan has spent a considerable part of his life as a migrant worker in non-industrial occupations.

Compared with other migrant-worker novelists, then, Wan writes less of factory life (while his poetry, although conspicuously less numerous than his prose, is more factory-focused).<sup>43</sup> Many stories depart from the city altogether, choosing rural settings instead. This fact, too, can be explained in part by Wan's biographical background, given the variety of non-industrial jobs he had done before and after moving to Beijing, including his preferred career as editor. Another motivation may lie in Wan's stated intention to demonstrate that a migrant-worker author's recognition as writer should come primarily from her or his artistic accomplishments, rather than from their social identity. Wan does not discard the importance of an author's "starting point" (出发点)—or material base, but insists on the primacy of her or his literary talent when it comes to appreciating and evaluating their output.<sup>44</sup> Choosing to reduce experiential referentiality to some lower degree is indeed a viable strategy in this direction. Of course, one should also keep into account that factory labour is less prevalent in Beijing than in other areas, most notably southern

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<sup>43</sup> Picerni, "Strangers in a Familiar City."

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

regions, and migrants in the capital often choose from a profusion of informal jobs, last but not least, construction work, characterised by a high degree of informality in hirings and contracts. The poetic tales of the factory by Xiao Hai, for example, him being the PLC member who writes most copiously about industrial labour, are extracted from his life before coming to Beijing, which is no coincidence.

In line with this, and reflecting a strong effort at experimentation, Wan's stories present a considerable variety of styles and genres. If "Taiyangdao de yi ye" and "Sanmei" can be located at the most abstract, avant-garde and less referential end of the spectrum, on the opposite end stands "Xiucan Li Zhiguo" 秀才李治国 (Li "Cultivated Talent" Zhiguo). Written between January and February 2019, it was published on a renowned online outlet, *Pengpai xinwen* 澎湃新闻 (officially translated as *The Paper*), in April. The Li Zhiguo of the title, nicknamed Xiucan, or "Cultivated Talent", was Wan's maternal uncle. The piece itself can be fully ascribed to reportage literature: Wan wanted to tell the real story of his uncle, reducing fiction to a bare minimum. In order to do so, he interviewed his relatives back home, trying to gather as many data as possible, an endeavour that Wan himself compared to the gallery of local humble characters in Tianjin described by Feng Jicai 冯骥才.<sup>45</sup> Also in a piece explicitly intended to be little more than reportage (and with this statement I do not mean to belittle reportage or to suggest that it is not aesthetically worthy; see the discussion in Chapter Six), narration steps in to provide the specific technical tools to blur the boundaries between the recollection of true facts and the author's creative intervention. In particular, complicating the relationship between the planes of story and discourse makes the operation possible.

Events are narrated in the first person from the point of view of Wan, who has just returned home, to Zhumadian in Henan province, for a brief period over New Year. The piece opens with the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

description of the uncle and a group of six going to a local agency office (*bangongchu* 办公处) to claim the uncle's unpaid salary after three months of a job he has already completed (the notorious practice of *taoyao gongqian* 讨要工钱, literally "asking for the salary"). It is clear that the employer has tricked him, using to his own advantage the uncle's naivete in accepting a spoken agreement based solely on the assumed implicit solidarity stemming from sharing the same origin. New entrepreneurial capitalism exploiting for ulterior motives a traditional morality which still holds a significant symbolic power over individuals is a common sight in the material reality and cultural production of postsocialist China. The connection with labour is made explicit since the very beginning, and the uncle himself carries the marks of exploitation on his own body: "Wrinkles descended on his face like brooks carved by rough stones. He was just in his forties, but already looked like an old man" (脸上是道道如溪的褶皱, 被生活的砺石划过。他才四十几岁, 却出了老相了).<sup>46</sup> Henceforth, the plot does not observe a chronological order. Shortly thereafter, an analepsis brings the plot back to the origins of the family's misfortunes, including an epidemic of swine fever, the marrying out of girls, and the failure of the family's small business.

While the beginning is in *medias res*, the analepsis gives Wan the opportunity to describe his uncle's upbringing and adult life. The nickname "Xiucai", or "Cultivated Talent", is motivated by Li Zhiguo being the most talented student of his hometown: in fact, *xiucai* 秀才 was one of the lower but still prestigious titles awarded to those who passed the entry-level imperial examinations. The term is still used in rural areas as a form of respect to people who have gone through higher education. Li Zhiguo attempted the *gaokao* 高考, China's national university entrance examination, failing once and then obtaining a meagre success at a provincial professional college (*dazhuan* 大专). He refused it, and received no further solicitation to bring glory to the hometown following the abolishment of the state job allocation system for university graduates in 1993. "From that moment,

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<sup>46</sup> Wan, "Xiucai Li Zhiguo," 292.

Xiucan was no longer Xiucan, and Li Zhiguo sank down to become an ordinary person living in the society. In this condition, he would now be faced with the two great dilemmas hanging over the heads of every youth who have reached the proper age: finding a job and getting married” (从此，秀才不再是秀才，李治国沦为了社会人。沦为社会人的大舅，遭遇了悬在每个适龄青年头上的两大难题：就业和婚姻)。<sup>47</sup> (Incidentally, these two dilemmas are precisely the problems that Wan repeatedly cites as his own, but I will return on the conflation of personal experience and account of others' later.) The narration then follows Li Zhiguo's migration to Guangzhou in 1997 and the shocking impact of his subsequent life on the assembly line. Unable to cope, he goes back home, then moves to Zhejiang, but once again he cannot adapt, and moves in with his sister—Wan's mother, because he cannot face the humiliation of going back home once again. He later lands a number of jobs, mainly doing repairing of electronic devices, and also tries to open his own stores, but all these attempts are generally unsuccessful. Although older than most of his peers—and references to social pressure to form a family are recurrent in the text, he finds a wife, but his constant lack of success and the risk associated with the couple's eventual decision to have a second child poison the family atmosphere. Eventually, narration reconnects with the time of the story, and the recollection of memory gives way back to the first-person narrator's observation:

他头白了，腰弯了，背驼了。家庭的吵闹，也麻木了他的神经。[...] 大舅终年劬劳，难得清闲，我来的这几天，是他不多的敞开说话的日子。一个被命运钳制的男人，失去了依傍的父母；姐姐们的孩子也都大了，家家有本难念的经，也无力顾及他。他只好供奉了神灵，寄哀思于父亲，在生境的逼迫下，求诸于无形的力量。

His hair was white, his waist curved, his back bent. Trouble at home had turned his spirit apathetic. [...] Uncle was always overworked throughout the year, hardly getting any rest. When I visited, it was

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, 293.

one of those rare periods when he would let his mouth loose. A man clamped down by fate, who had lost the parents he could rely upon; his sisters' kids had all grown up, and everyone was grappling with their own hard destiny, unable to be of any help to him. He could do nothing but pray to the deities, sending his sorrowful thoughts to his father. Forced by circumstances, he would seek for a shapeless force [to help him].<sup>48</sup>

The bitter end of the story draws on a typical atmosphere seen in other instances of the PLC's production. In particular, the obliteration of youthful desires by the precarity of life and the conflation of family misfortunes and social hardship in the image of "fate" make of "Xiucai Li Zhiguo" a fully migrant-worker story (whereby *migrant-worker* functions as an aesthetic and taxonomic category). The picture of the defeated intellectual, who could not be rescued by knowledge alone, is reminiscent of Lu Xun, although in this case there is no "new youth" with a valid alternative to the old intellectual's demise. If any, it is the narrator who represents youth, and his life is not so different from that of Li Zhiguo.

Several members of the PLC have occasionally written about their parents, relatives or friends, or even themselves, as stories that epitomise the conditions of Chinese society's downtrodden in cities and the countryside alike. While most of these stories follow rather regular schemes, either reconstructing the person's life story in a chronological order or concentrating on one or some key episodes, Wan adds a stronger literary taste to "Xiucai Li Zhiguo." What he does is introducing the story in medias res, with the scene of the uncle leading the author and others to claim his salary. Then, an analepsis brings the narration back to Li Zhiguo's birth, and only then follows a linear pattern that eventually reunites with the present and with the author's direct observation.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, 297.



Throughout the narration, the uncle, in spite of his unfulfilling life trajectory, appears as a mentor figure to Wan, described as “my model during childhood” (我儿时的榜样).<sup>49</sup> The narrative and personal significance of a heroic, mentor figure in Wan’s production will be discussed shortly. In “Xiucan Li Zhiguo”, the moral mentorship provided by the uncle is associated with books and knowledge, represented by the anthology of Song poetry and the leather notebook which the uncle carries along during his peregrinations:

大舅已经全然是个社会青年了，唯一能标注秀才生涯的，是他随身携的两个物件：一部方砖厚的《宋诗选读》，一本牛皮笔记本，扉页上书：海阔凭鱼跃，天高任鸟飞。

Uncle was a social youth through and through by now. The only things that carried the marks of the scholar Xiucan were the two objects he carried along all the time: a book of *Selection of Song Poetry*, as thick as a square brick, and a leather notebook, with an inscription on the cover: “Fish jumping in the sea immense, birds flying in the lofty sky”.<sup>50</sup>

The inscription comes from the anthology of Song poetry compiled by Ruan Yue 阮閱 in the twelfth century, named *Shihua zongui* 詩話總龜 (*A General Source for Remarks on Poetry*), therefore increasing its cultural appeal. The fish in the vast sea and birds flying in the sky also allude to labour migration as a form of agency, a way to venture out into the world. Later, during his travels, the uncle loses many of his belongings, including his savings, and the two items are all that remain to him, as a sort of moral bastion while other material aspects of his life are crumbling apart. The story itself closes with a final reference to the two items:

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, 292.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 294.

我见他眉头的疙瘩展平了，趁机问，“大舅，还读宋诗吗？”大舅瞪大了眼睛，仿佛听到的是一组陌生世界的词汇，他摇摇头，“早抛到后脑勺了。”“那本《宋诗选读》呢？”“啊——早丢了，丢哪了呢？”他似乎在问自己。

Seeing that the pimples in the space between his eyebrows had flattened, I rushed to ask: “Uncle, do you still read Song poetry?” Uncle opened his eyes wide, as if the words he had just heard had come from a world of mystery. He shook his head. “I’ve thrown it to the back of my head for some time”. “What about that *Selection of Song Poetry*?” “Ah, I lost it a long time ago. Where did I lose it?” He looked as if he was asking himself that.<sup>51</sup>

The loss of the book metaphorically implies the loss of the lofty aspirations of the uncle’s youth. On a more general plane, it also implies the sacrifice of youth to the altar of (others’) profit. The final scene may be real or fictional, but Wan construes it in a way that readers are left with the same sense of metaphorical loss as experienced by the uncle at that moment. Only now, in his old age, the uncle seems to remember or realise that the book—and youth, and the desire to write—have gone. This reading is consistent with the frequent references to a youth grinded down by the assembly line and old dreams of writing wasted by the circumstances of life that heavily load migrant-worker prose and, above all, poetry.

The choice to write in the first person can be associated with an effort to affirm the writer’s reliability in relaying lived experience. As “Xiucui Li Zhiguo” is elaborated as a piece of reportage, the narrator is implied to be—and actually is—Wan Huashan himself, who recollects what he has witnessed of his uncle and the stories he has heard about his past. However, the empirical author—i.e., the person who actually does the writing in the real world—is not always the same as the implied author. Theorists of narratology and literary criticism have been dealing with important

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, 297.

debates about the nature of the implied author, but what appears consistent among its proponents is its fictionality: the implied author is created by the “historical person” of the empirical author as a narrative strategy.<sup>52</sup> Eco variously describes the model author—the implied author’s incarnation in his theoretical system—as voice, strategy, construction.<sup>53</sup> The implied author is the person that the implied reader should imagine having written the text, and is therefore closely connected with the problems of focalisation and point of view illustrated by Genette. In the case of “Xiucai Li Zhiguo”, the implied author and the empirical author are the same, both incarnated in the person of the writer Wan, and this allows him to diminish the level of fictionality of the story.

A different strategy is in action in “Pi Houzi” 皮猴子 (Pi Houzi), the short story with which Wan won the First Labourers’ Literature Prize in January 2019. By the author’s own admission, the story mixes elements of fiction and reality, starting from the fact that the narrator is surnamed Wan 万, just like Wan Huashan himself; furthermore, the I-narrator who tells the story is also the conflation of at least two historical persons, namely Wan himself and his younger cousin.<sup>54</sup> One of the two threads of the story follows the vicissitudes of the narrator himself, named Wan Guangshui 万广水, in his journey out of his hometown in Henan for work. He moves to Beijing after a period in the industrial south and starts working as a calligrapher’s apprentice, but is fired after the employer finds out he received no previous training in calligraphy. After a period of trouble and worry, Wan Guangshui finally finds a job in the IT sector, which finally gives him a sense of dignity to relieve the pressure he feels from his family and the girlfriend he has found in the meantime. The job turns out to be a scam, though, and the employer flees after three months with Wan Guangshui’s salary. Dumped by his girlfriend, Wan Guangshui then lands a job at a kitchenware store, which also ends up badly due to the boss’ sister, who has a fight with him after

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<sup>52</sup> Dan Shen, “What Is the Implied Author?”

<sup>53</sup> Eco, *Sei passeggiate nei boschi narrativi*, 18–19, 27, 30.

<sup>54</sup> Personal communication, April 2021.

he fails to bring her the *laobing* 烙饼 flatbread she had requested (which occurs out of Wan Guangshui's good heart, since he decided to eat it himself and give her another one with a filling she then does not like after noticing that a fly had been resting on hers). Shortly thereafter, the story bumps into the real event of the Daxing fire in November 2017, when nineteen migrant workers were killed in a fire in a housing block with poor to no safety conditions. Following this tragedy, the Beijing municipality began massively evicting masses of migrant workers from the city, citing reasons of safety. The authorities' treatment of migrant workers as disposable commodities, abusively terming them the "low-end population" (*diduan renkou* 低端人口), produced a public outcry, although it could not stop migrants from being expelled from their dwelling places in the frigid Beijing winter.<sup>55</sup> Wan Huashan's mention of the event is worth recalling because, despite the impact that the fire and subsequent evictions had on the migrant population of Beijing, it is almost never referred to in PLC publications. Anyway, Wan Guangshui after the start of the evictions, moves to Picun. There, he comes into contact with a group of other migrants from Henan, including a former classmate of his, Huang Dakun 黄大坤, who introduces Guangshui to a reselling project where he would have to invest a considerable amount of money (although it is subtly implied that the project is not entirely legal). He goes to look for his pal San Wang 三旺 to borrow some money, and that is where he bumps into his uncle, Pi Houzi.

The character of Pi Houzi is actually introduced in the opening paragraph of the story, which begins, again, in medias res. The narrative then takes a long detour to tell Pi Houzi's activities and expose his particular traits, then shifts to recount Wan Guangshui's events, leaving Pi Houzi aside, until it reconnects to the initial scene in the moment of the reencounter. Other details about Pi Houzi's life are told in more flashbacks after the two meet again. We learn that Pi Houzi is a surname that can mean different things: "dirty" (because he loved to play in the mud as a child),

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<sup>55</sup> Li, Song and Zhang, "Beijing Evictions."

“smart”, and “unbeatable”. His true name, however, is Wan Jinqiang 万金强. He had to leave their family after the trouble he procured to them following a failed business activity. Originally, he had hoped to become a player of *suona* 唢呐, a Chinese double-reed horn, and he had talent, but dropped out of the band because of disagreements with the new leader. He is furthermore presented as a good farmer back when he was young and helping to tend to the land, the first of the village to go to university, successful with girls, and an enterprising venturer out into the world who still maintained his modesty:

所有这些都让人叹服，大家嚷嚷，有人热着嗓子喊，皮猴子见了世面了，随即就有嘘声，啥皮猴子啊，万金强。

“你们还是叫我皮猴子吧。”

Everyone was amazed at these [facts], and they would go around shouting, someone even making their throats hoarse in the process: Pi Houzi has seen the face of the world! Immediately after that, someone said, Get done with Pi Houzi! He’s Wan Jinqiang!

“Just keep calling me Pi Houzi.”<sup>56</sup>

This heroic description, and, more generally, the portrait of the man provided to the reader is laden with details that prove Pi Houzi’s uncommon character and strengthen his role as a mentor for the young Wan Guangshui. The same mentoring figure is embodied also by Li Zhiguo in “Xiucai Li Zhiguo”, but here it is further thematised and elaborated. First of all, it is made explicit in several passages throughout the story, which tell of Guangshui’s admiration for his uncle in his childhood: “On my way to school, when I slept alone, I would still think of my uncle. I was not the only one to think of Uncle when I was afraid or busy on the fields” (我还是挂念我的叔叔，上学的路上，一

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<sup>56</sup> Wan Huashan, “Pi Houzi,” 35.

个人睡的时候。害怕的时候，农忙的时候这时候，想起叔叔的，不止我一个).<sup>57</sup> This statement embodies the double nature of Pi Houzi's heroism—partly collective, given the description of his many admirable activities done for the village or in business, partly personal. The personal sentiment that ties the two characters together is incarnated in the episode of Pi Houzi teaching Guangshui to skate on ice.

他会教会我游泳、滑冰。刚开始，我不敢下去，总怕父亲打我，也怕冰破裂了掉下去。他哄啊劝啊，还说给我买麦芽糖，我站在岸上就是不干，后来他生气了。“是我皮猴子的侄子吗？”他腾腾跑上河岸，一把揪住我的棉袄后背，找到一个低矮的岸坡，双手一旋将我撂到冰面上。我浮在凉津津的河冰上，一动不动，大声嚎哭起来，大朵的泪花子砸到冰上，腾起丝丝的热烟。我哭够了，还不敢动。

这会，叔叔放声大笑，他的笑声撞击着河对面的陡岸，弹回来，冲进我的耳膜。我生气了，索性就赖在冰上，俯卧着装睡装死。

叔叔继续笑着，“唸”的也站到河面上，说，“水娃，看我，快看我。”他的声音带着兴奋和乡野少年独有的豪爽。

我忍不住扭过头去，看见叔叔在一个直角的河岸边，双手撑着冰，像一根柱子倒立着，布鞋的脚跟微微触碰岸上枯干了的茅草。

他意识到我看了，更兴奋了，“水娃，看我，一只手也行。”

果然，他又表演了一只手。“快爬起来，水娃。”

我赶紧爬起来，拍拍屁股，“叔叔，教教我。”

“等等我，叔叔，冰下面有龙吗？”

“有，龙宫就在河底下。”

“叔叔，你讲讲龙宫的故事吧。”

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 32–33.

He would teach me to swim and skate on ice. At the beginning, I did not dare go down with him. I was afraid that Dad would beat me, and I was afraid that the ice would break and I would fall in the water. Uncle tried to coax and convince me, he even promised to buy me candies, but I just remained on the shore, motionless. Later, he got angry. “Are you not my nephew, Pi Houzi’s nephew?” He rushed towards the shore, grabbed the back of my jacket, found a low slope and rotated his hands to knock me down on the ice surface.

I flew over the gelid ice of the river. I didn’t move, and started crying loud. Bunches of tears hit the ice, raising stripes of hot smoke. After I had cried all my tears out, I still didn’t dare to move.

Then Uncle started laughing. The sound of his laugh dashed against the steep coast on the opposite side and bounced back, bursting through my eardrums. I was mad with him. I just lay face down, pretending to be asleep, or dead.

While continuing to laugh, Uncle stepped on the surface with a *tong* sound and said: “Froggy, look at me, fast, look at me”. His voice was full of excitement and carried that boldness which is proper only of a rustic youth.

I couldn’t help but turning my head and looking. Uncle was by a shore in an angle, with both hands on the ice. He looked like a pillar, his cloth shoes gently caressing the withered thatch on the shore.

He got even more excited as soon as he realised that I was looking. “Froggy, look! Only one hand!”

He truly did it with only one hand. “Come, Froggy, fast!”

I rushed on my feet and patted my but. “Uncle, teach me!”

“Wait for me, Uncle! Are there dragons under the ice?”

“Of course, the Palace of Dragons is under this river.”

“Uncle, tell me the story of the Palace of Dragons!”<sup>58</sup>

The episode is noteworthy because it recurs towards the closing of the story, thus assuming a larger metaphorical significance. In fact, Pi Houzi’s teaching is not merely practical, as in training a

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 32.

certain skill, but moral. While the emphasis on his inspiring example and positive virtues recurs throughout the text, Pi Houzi's moral instruction mainly condenses in a few passages where he pushes Guangshui to look beyond mere material gain and assign more value to spiritual satisfaction. After listening to Guangshui's complaints about his former girlfriend, especially lamenting how it who had to do all the cooking, washing clothes and buying gifts, Pi Houzi invites him to change his perspective:

“我再问你，你付出这些的时候，烦恼吗？现在没人让你做饭、洗袜子、过感恩节，你快乐吗？”

我更答不上来。

“想想我的话，你们在一起时，你劳累，你辛苦，但你是快乐的，有价值的，这就够了。”

“人活一辈子，结果都一样。将来结婚，他丈夫不过占用的时间比你长一点罢了。人的一生是个过程，不是个结果。仅此而已。”

“Let me ask you again: at the time when you had to do all this, were you annoyed? Are you happy now that you've got no one asking you to make food, wash clothes and spend Thanksgiving?”

Again, no answer came up to me.

“Think of my words. When you were together, you were tired, you worked hard, but you were happy.

It was worth it. That's all you need.

“The outcome of every person's life is always the same. She will get married, but her husband's only advantage over you will be having some more time to spend with her, and that will be all. Human life is a process, not an outcome. That's all.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, 37.



This statement must be considered in its discursive context, that of China's economic development and the social pressure on the youth to observe the normative goals expected from them, namely economic success and marriage. When it comes to the specific situation of rural–urban migrant workers, it can also be interpreted as a rupture of the previously dominant state of mind that individuals had to sacrifice their present in order to achieve better prospects for future generations (undoubtedly also a reflection of China's postsocialist ideology). Such friction appears consistent with a stronger search for personal fulfilment experienced by the newer generations of migrant workers, shifting the main point of life from sacrifice to enjoyment.<sup>60</sup> While such a vision would probably strike readers from an entirely different context as consistent with the neoliberal code of values and its individualistic appeal to live for the moment, here it is rather a proclamation of individuality against compulsory self-exploitation, and a call to privilege interpersonal relationships and happiness over material gain.

This, if the interpretation is correct, may be true in social and ideological terms, but Pi Houzi also plays a purely narrative function. In technical terms, Pi Houzi embodies the spokesperson's figure fulfilling an "*ideological function*," which Genette summarises as "the more didactic form of an authorized commentary on the action."<sup>61</sup> On the level of the story, Pi Houzi is a mentor to Guangshui, training him to some relevant skills of life during his childhood and, later, helping him out of the quandary he is in through moral instruction. On the level of discourse, he is tasked by the author, Wan Huashan, to illustrate his view of life and moral principles. In this sense, the choice to tell the story through a narrator in the first person—the implied author—who is not the same as the empirical author finds its sense. There is no lack of similarities between "Pi Houzi" and "Xiucai Liu Zhiguo" in terms of plot, relations between the characters (the mentoring figure above all) and other general characteristics, but the former avoids the explicit referentiality to real experience of the

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<sup>60</sup> Huang Chuanhui, *Generation Now*.

<sup>61</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 256.

latter through a number of narrative strategies, the foremost of which are precisely the construction of an implied author separate from the empirical author, and the subsequent concealment of the historically-living author's voice in the figure of the fictional hero invested with the aforementioned ideological function: the uncle Pi Houzi/Wan Jinqiang. Fictional elements cohabit with abundant references unmistakably pointing to Wan Huashan's real life, starting with the very surname of the main characters. However, the skilful use of fiction makes the story less autobiographical and more focused on the message it hopes to convey. For sure, the assigned purpose to transmit moral instruction is a heritage of the rich tradition of Chinese literature since its classical times, condensed in the traditional mandate that "Literature conveys the Way" (*wen yi zai dao* 文以载道), and worker literature is all but immune from this dictum—also in the form of practical advice to people involved in rural-urban migration. Wan's characteristic is to transmit this standpoint not through references to his own lived experience, but by conjuring up a narrative spokesperson.

Like mentioned above, the ice-skating recurs towards the end of the story in the form of an extended metaphor. With Guangshui unsure about what to do with his life and depressed about his grim prospects, Pi Houzi tries to encourage him: "Froggy, you've got hands and feet, what exactly would you be unable to do? Should I throw you down again?" ( "水娃，你有手有脚，干什么不好呢？非得我再扔你下去吗？" ). In this moment, Guangshui's answer seems to prove that he has learned his lesson: "Uncle, do you want to do a handstand on the ice again? If you don't throw me, I'll jump myself" ( "叔，你要再能冰上倒立？你不扔，我自己就下去。" ).<sup>62</sup> Shortly after that, Pi Houzi tries to do a handstand on an iced river, but slips and falls, his head hitting the surface. This causes him a memory loss, and the story ends with the doctor's recommendation to Guangshui to help him recover by talking about familiar situations. The relationship is thus reversed: the student, now mature, cares for the mentor. In any case, what is underscored here is the centrality of

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, 39.

new and old affective ties for migrant workers' survival in the city's unfavourable social environment.

“Pi Houzi” is also the story where Wan Huashan experiments with plot non-linearity in the most complex way. Analepses and sub-analepses are scattered throughout the text, causing constant changes of pace to the narration, which keeps going back and forth between the present time of the story and the past of Wan Guangshui and Pi Houzi. The following scheme will try to make sense of the temporal construction of the plot:

### Present time.

The story begins in medias res, with Guangshui and Wang Dakun, the person who introduces him to the reselling business, waiting at San Wang's doorstep to borrow money for Guangshui.

我和大坤在别墅区的门口，没等到三旺。十一月的风像刀子一样，使劲撕割暴露于自然界的劳动者，我不想做这样劳动者，我还是想回到温室里，哪怕去听“国家工程”或者金融课呢。

大坤建议回去等消息的时候，大门口传来一声“水娃”。我愣了一下。

来北京这几年，除了三旺偶尔喝醉想老家，没人这么叫过我。况且这声音是熟稔的、顺理成章的，似乎左手摩挲右手的伤疤一般。

At the entrance of the neighbourhood, I and Dakun did not wait for San Wang. The November wind was like a knife, scything [the skin of] workers exposed to the natural world. I didn't want to become such a worker. I wanted to go back inside, to the warm, even if it was just to listen to [lectures about] “state projects” or finance classes.

In the moment when Dakun suggested to just go back and wait for news, a sound reverberated from the gate: “Froggy”. I froze.

In all these years in Beijing, except for the few occasions when I and San Wang got drunk and thought of home, no one had called me that. And that voice sounded familiar and natural, almost like a left hand gently rubbing the scars on the right one.<sup>63</sup>

Pi Houzi is introduced immediately after this passage. *Shuiwa* 水娃, or Froggy in my translation proposed above, the affectionate nickname he calls Guangshui by, immediately causes a temporal friction: the mention of the fact that “no one” had called him by that name in Beijing, coupled with the unexpected familiarity of the voice, anticipates the flashbacks that are to follow. The relevance of an overture in medias res should not be underestimated, either. For Eco, it allows the reader to feel they are already inside a fictional world, rather than accompanying them in.<sup>64</sup>

#### Past time 1.

The first analepsis brings the narration to “nine years ago in May” (九年前的五月),<sup>65</sup> when a group of individuals, led by Boss Zhao (*Zhao zong* 赵总), visits the village and forcibly takes away some personal goods of the Wan family as a reparation for an unspecified business loss caused by Wan Jinqiang. This part covers no more than two pages, but it introduces an aura of mystery and fascination around the character.

#### Past time 2.

The time of the second analepsis is “a day in March” (那时三月的一天), also “nine years ago”. This analepsis, longer than the previous one, concerns the arrival of a truck full of candlesticks borrowed by Wan Jinqiang, and his subsequent attempts to sell them to the villagers.

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Eco, *Sei passeggiate*, 155.

<sup>65</sup> Wan Huashan, “Pi Houzi,” 60.

This part deepens both Pi Houzi's character and his relation with the I-narrator. Both these analepses are partially heterodiegetic, because they are not concerned with the main narrative of the narrator's vicissitudes, but are a sort of "detour" into Pi Houzi's past.

#### Past time 3.

A short and rapid interlude separates Past time 2 and Past time 3, introduced by a typical proleptical phrase: "Ten years passed in the blink of an eye" (一晃, 十年过去了).<sup>66</sup> The few lines following this phrase condense Guangshui's studies, him quitting school, his travels in South China for work and the occupations he has had (clearly resembling Wan Huashan's real experience). What I schematically consider Past 3 starts immediately thereafter, introduced by a temporal location: "It was three years ago that I came to Beijing" (我是三年前的北京).<sup>67</sup> This part follows Guangshui throughout his time in Beijing, until the encounter with the reselling business.

#### Present time.

At this point, the narrative reconnects with the story, exactly in the same moment and spot of the very first lines. The suspense of the overture finds its resolution with the revelation of Pi Houzi's identity and the background of the nickname.

#### Past time 4.

The phrase "Back to when he was young" (他年轻那会)<sup>68</sup> sets off another analepsis, this time following Pi Houzi's youthful adventures, with a closer focus on his relationship with the narrator. As a consequence, the narration is more homodiegetic than the previous analepses, with the narrator

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 16.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, 31.

also in the role as direct observatory of many of the events described. Lengthy digressions also provide glimpses into their home village and area.

Present time.

“This was my uncle, Pi Houzi” (这就是我的叔叔，皮猴子):<sup>69</sup> this conclusive sentence brings the narration back to the present, through to the end of the story.

Notably, the flashbacks constitute a tale of a rural past, while the present is exclusively urban. This separation between a rural past and an urban present is another defining trait of migrant-worker literature (see Li Ruo’s case in chapter Seven). There is no trace of nostalgia here, however. While the narrator-observer is a young boy in the countryside, the city appears remote and indistinct, the place where Pi Houzi vanishes during his legendary trips outward. Later, when the city becomes the reality and present of the narrator, the countryside is evoked only in terms of memory and past. The nonlinearity of the plot allows Wan to explore the multiple nuances of this dialectics between present and past (and memory). The time of the narrative,

Present time > Past time 1 > Past time 2 > Past time 3 > Present time > Past time 4 > Present time,

subverts the time of the story, that is the chronological order of the happening of events, which would be as follows:

Past time 4 > Past time 2 > Past time 1 > Past time 3 > Present time.

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, 36.

This kind of narrative construction gives the text a strong fictional character beyond the limits of nonfictional autobiography, and displays the author's ability to master the techniques proper of literary invention. Some final considerations should then be spent for other relevant tools employed by Wan Haushan in the narrative of "Pi Houzi." On the level of style, Wan Huashan makes ample use of irony, particularly to ridicule authorities and petty labour contractors, with some sparks of self-irony, that also address his delusion at being above common workers: "I had boasted too much, now I was an engineer, now a businessman. Now that my girlfriend had come, I was doing manual labour, I had become a member of the labouring people—it was shameful" (我吹大了, 我又是工程师, 又是商人, 女朋友一来, 就干上体力活了, 成为劳动人民了, 不像话).<sup>70</sup> Descriptions do not abound, but are used to present the hometown of Wanweizi, rural poverty, and, by contrast, the opulence of Wang Dakun's house. The progression of rhythm, in the part concerning Guangshui's life in Beijing before his reencounter with his uncle, from one job failure to another, is well-crafted and punctuated through references to the inexorably dwindling resources, each introducing the next episode: "I had already eaten box food for a month" (我已经吃了一个月的盒饭); "I ran out of the remaining sum on my credit card" (信用卡余额套完了); "My credit card was empty" (信用卡用光了).<sup>71</sup> Finally, language is mixed, as several characters use words or phrases from their native Henanese dialect, enforcing the overall realistic character of the story.

Then again, Wan Huashan complicates things: the homodiegetic narrator makes a couple of intradiegetic interventions aimed at reminding the reader that they are not reading a piece of invention, but a reportage of true facts that have occurred in reality. While the rest of the story is replete with fictional craft that strengthens its *literary* character, here, quite paradoxically indeed, the fictional elements are reduced to create a *fiction of documentary*: a first intradiegetic interjection

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, 24, 25, 26.

occurs after the narrator has illustrated his germophobia, which will cause the misunderstanding with his boss' wife as he refuses to give her the flatbread she wanted after he saw a fly sitting on it: "What I have said above can just be considered a proper monologue, like our middle school teacher used to teach us, but my point was just to explain that..." (上述不失为一段准确的内心独白, 初中老师讲过的, 我这样写的关键目的还在于想表明). Later, he sarcastically addresses readers themselves when he introduces "Erwang—that's right, you're not mistaken, Sanwang's brother" (二旺是的, 你没猜错, 就是三旺他哥). By so doing, the empirical author reminds the reader that the implied author is only telling his own lived experience, instead of trying to create a fictional story that he would better tell by abstracting himself from it and avoiding intradiegetic interventions. Here lies the paradox which makes "Pi Houzi" the piece where Wan Huashan most successfully balances the accounts of true facts with fictional literary creation.

#### **8.4. The worker-author subject in crisis**

For Rong Cai, post-Mao literature reflected the condition of crisis that the intellectual subject was going through in its seeming failure to claim a speaking and seeing agency in its effort to cope with the sociopolitical conditions of the time.<sup>72</sup> The subject in Wan Huashan's work is likewise crossed by a double crisis, social and narrative. The social crisis of the subject essentially happens along the same lines as we have explored in other literary creations from the PLC: stuck in the impossibility to move on with their life beyond the restricting opportunities offered by migrant labour, in the rupture between a full expression of agency and the material limitations on it. The moral wisdom that Pi Houzi/Wan Huashan imparts on his younger nephew, or materialised in the lost book of Song poetry, constitutes a kind of emotional way out from this condition of impasse. It

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<sup>72</sup> Rong Cai, *The Subject in Crisis*.



is not merely a consolation prize though, as if the subject had to be content with moral satisfaction because life as a migrant worker had brought the subject no relevant socioeconomic accomplishment. On the contrary, it is an active rejection of socially-determined conditions, a productive act pushing the subject to find new ways. Its effects are particularly clear when comparing the subject at the mercy of events in “Taiyangdao de yi ye” with the narrator of “Pi Houzi” and the firmer grip on his life he obtains at the end of the story. The validity of moral action as an individual solution—but also a collective one, in the context of the PLC—is even more compelling in the light of the seeming impossibility to alter the prevailing social relations.

The narrative crisis takes place at the fracture between fictional representation and recollection of true facts. Again, this is not only the result of a reflection on the limits of reportage. The primary reason for Wan’s oscillation between fiction and fact is personal. Initially, his vision of literature was based on a strict separation between fictional creation and true events. Later, his *dagong* years brought irreversible changes to his views on the matter, causing him to abandon this high-brow vision of writing for a more favourable opinion of a literature “contaminated” by the real-life experience of its creators. While he holds that there is no necessary (*biran* 必然) continuity between real-life experience and literary creation, he is also adamant that authors are inevitably influenced by what they have gone through in their lives, which then reverberates in their work. He may not always write of himself or migrant workers, but his writing is impregnated with the consequences of his own life, because the experiences he endured have fundamentally changed his views on the world and on literature itself.<sup>73</sup> But besides this personal reason, it is impossible not to see in this operation an effort to arouse an interest in workers’ literature that goes beyond its social significance (or also the moral imperative felt by scholars and cultural operators to engage with the “writings from below”) and valorises its aesthetic element instead. Going back to fundamental categories of the Chinese literary writing recalled in chapter One, namely *zhen* (beauty), *shan*

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<sup>73</sup> Interview in Beijing on 9 November 2019.

(moral education) and *mei* (beauty, aesthetics), it is possible to conceptualise Wan's writing as an attempt to confer a greater degree of *mei* on stories already overloaded with *zhen*. Their *zhen* comes out of their social setting, but it is also granted by the fact that, being autofiction, their author confers them with truthfulness, having himself gone through that experience. Wan's attention to form and plot construction has the effect of powering up *mei* as well, balancing this already strong *zhen* (*shan* was already fairly present in the case studies examined so far, and Wan makes no exception). In a way, this is a significant departure from intellectual writers of proletarian literature in the 1930s, but also from non-subaltern authors of 21st-century subaltern fiction, who overload their stories with *zhen* precisely because they do not have the "privilege" (so to speak) of experience on their side.

The way the author relates to and conveys experience changes according to the different degrees of focalisation found in the body of works investigated above. The dynamics of empirical and implied author are particularly telling in this regard. If "Xiucui Li Zhiguo" is the story where the factuality of experience is the most pronounced, thanks to the conflation of empirical and implied author in one person (and the story, in fact, leans more towards the reportage), "Taiyangdao de yi ye" stands on the opposite end of the spectrum, as experience is carefully concealed beneath a thick layer of fictionality, with only marginal aspects of Wan's life made apparent in the implied author's vicissitudes. "Pi Houzi" is where the most interesting synthesis is reached. By no means does this imply a growing process of maturation on Wan's part, because such a process would imply a gradual improvement of the way he handles the relation between fiction and experience, empirical author and model author. What we find here is a survey of options, an experimental research into the possibilities available to the worker writer.

**CONCLUSION:**

**METATEXT**

But I know very well  
that a poet must always say more  
than is hidden in the roar of words.  
And that is poetry.  
Else he could not with his verses lever out  
a bud from honeyed veils  
or force a shiver  
to run down your spine  
as he strips down the truth

Jaroslav Seifert

I began this journey with several questions. I did not know exactly what we would find along the path, although I had certain assumptions and expectations, mostly preconceived ideas that had convinced me to pursue some research questions over many others that surely could have been followed as well. The journey quickly became an exploration, conducted, I hope, with a humble and open mind. Eventually, I just wanted to find what was there to be found, highly valuing surprise and disappointment with respect to my previous assumptions on what I would have expected to find in texts and practice. More questions emerged during the journey; many were left unanswered. These conclusions are meant to wrap up the work identifying some basic traits that help us discuss the questions that motivated this research at the light of its findings.

*Is there a workers' literature to speak of?*

The first question posed in the Introduction, perhaps the most fundamental one, concerned the what use workers make of literature as a vehicle for self-expression and the expression of the self.

Reflecting on this question, this thesis has constantly wondered whether there is a *workers' literature* to properly speak of in the first place. The issue is particularly relevant for the situation that followed the 1980s, with the dissipation of class politics in China. With respect to activists and scholars, who seem more or less convinced that something called *workers' literature* does exist, or should exist, in spite of their possible disagreements over its connotations, we have constantly encountered authors whose motivation to write was not to shape up a specific field, but rather to produce something meaningful for their own lives, also with very different reasons.

It would be quite problematic, as a result, to find a prescriptive connotation to workers' literature, i.e. theoretical or practical guidelines on what workers *should* write, drawing clear boundaries of the literature and determining who is in and who is out. At the same time, however, we need to move out of a purely descriptive role, i.e. what workers *do* write in practice. We have stucked to this form throughout the thesis out of methodological necessity, to set clear criteria for the selection of the corpus we would have been investigating and to specify our approach to it. However, it would be limiting to arrive at this point without any idea on how to step forward from that position. In fact, what we have found is a coherent configuration held together by weaves of intertextuality and united by common conditions, similar moods, shared necessities out of which interpreting the world. At the same time, this configuration is made internally rich and variegated by different styles, genres, formal strategies, stylistic innovations and experiments, precisely because it has no authoritative institution setting the style it should follow (of course mediators do play this role in a certain way, but to a much different degree).

It is precisely these shared characteristics that makes what workers write relatable to each other. This is true even when worker authors lament that their fellow colleagues do not like reading what they write. Usually, worn out by labour and life at the margins, and subjected like everyone else to the intellectually cheaper entertainment opportunities offered by urban capitalism, these individuals are not interested in literature at all. And it is true even when worker authors themselves

tend not to read each other, but to turn more to other instances of old or modern literature that enjoy a greater symbolic authority in China's literary mind. This is the result of several factors, including formal education, the persistence of canon, as well as, in less structural terms, to the ability of authors such as Du Fu, Li Bai, Haizi, Yu Hua and others to capture the human condition in a strikingly efficient way. The analysis of case studies has shown that it would be flawed to assume that worker authors (and workers in general, for that matter) necessarily or exclusively read what bespeaks of their condition: their effort to produce literary works that are more engaging, sophisticated, crafty, when not openly experimental, is also a driving factor behind their search for a wider range of sources of inspiration.

Nevertheless, on an *objective* plane (and not rarely on a *subjective* one as well), workers' literary products resonate with each other. We need to return to a classical but still valid proposition by Marx, according to whom it is humans' social being that determines their consciousness.<sup>1</sup> This idea does not mean that writing is the automatic or mechanic result of material conditions. Such over-determinism belongs to a misreading which interprets the relationship between base and superstructure in a unilateral and monodirectional way, doing no justice to the much more nuanced and ultimately dialectical approach held by Marx himself. Authors do have creative agency. That is even more evident when it comes to worker authors who do not see themselves just as individual contributors to a larger body of workers' literature. Fan Yusu's literary mind wants to be imaginative, lyrical, less mimetic and "pure," which is to say capable to say something meaningful about life that is not restricted to her own condition and story. Many other authors of the PLC clearly share this goal. Yet, the stamp of class tends to appear anyway, influencing *what* and/or *how* they write, surfacing from characters, settings, situations, moods, events, sensibilities.

What is more compelling, the influence of life and class tends to show its traces precisely in those instances of writing that have apparently nothing to do with social themes. Would Xiao Hai—

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, 21.

whose verses are filled with love, youth and spirituality, besides labour—have written with the same animosity, found in Haizi and Bob Dylan (definitely not worker authors themselves!) valid sources of inspirations to challenge a mundanity of monotony and lack of accomplishment, had he not been going through an experience fundamentally assimilable to millions of other migrant workers? In many respects, these themes find their finest expression in Xiao Hai’s more “neutral” poetics. Here we see how the author’s social being becomes a fundamental constituent of the author’s consciousness and mediates the way she or he understands the world—and write about it. After all, as Eagleton suggested, “If the text displays itself as ‘natural,’ it manifests itself equally as constructed artifice” from an ideological point of view.<sup>2</sup>

It is also for this reason that calling workers’ literature as such, i.e. adopting a unifying approach when dealing with literary productions by workers, is poignant on the part of the critic. On the one hand, it stresses the alternative, but equally meaningful, perspective on society, history and life that comes from individuals who belong to the subaltern classes. On the other hand, it exposes the inequalities of condition and asymmetries of power in the field of literary production. In other words, we are faced with the task of understanding how his individual creativity reflects a subjective way to spiritually and materially cope with a common condition engulfing him in a web of social relations and interdependence. This is necessary not only to acknowledge that, as Bakhtin and Medvedev observed, “[literature’s] individuality can only be completely discovered and defined in this process of interaction,”<sup>3</sup> but also because only by fully recognising the aesthetic individuality *and* social significance of workers’ literature can we both render justice to its complexity and grasp the insight it can offer on contemporary working-class consciousness formation. This process has never been absolutely linear, and it is much less so now that it is largely spontaneous and unorganised. As a consequence, case studies have shown not an incipience of a coherent class

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<sup>2</sup> Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 85.

<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin and Medvedev, *The Formal Method*, 28.

consciousness, but rather different and irregular individual understandings of the collective dimension of migrant workers' condition and its position in local and global capitalism.

Here is where the author-based approach (i.e. focused on the *by*) maintained by this thesis shows one of its most interesting applications, because it keeps our focus on 1) how rich and variegated individual contributions are to what we have encapsulated in the totality of *contemporary workers' literature*; and 2) “how much” of the author (with their social background, experience, etc.) remains in the text even when the subject-matter (the *about*) is not immediately superimposable to their life.

### *A literature with a history*

This thesis has dedicated a considerable amount of space to the history of workers' literature, in the assumption that the most pressing issues of theoretical and practical nature that populated the previous configurations of what went by the name of *proletarian literature*, *worker-peasant-soldier literature*, or more informally *workers' or working-class literature*, might resonate in the literary production under survey. Although a gulf exists between pre- and post-1980s workers' literature in China, the assumption is validated by a comparative analysis of the two. In fact, we have found that many of the issues raised in the early 20th century with regard to literary productions by workers have been still operative from the 1980s up to the present day. Besides themes and styles, these issues essentially include authorship, i.e. the actual possibility for workers to produce meaningful literature; the relationship between art and society, mostly articulated in the tension between tendentious versus independent literature during the “proletarian episode” of the early 20th century, but more in terms of social relevance versus artistic quality in more recent times; the challenge to dominant or commonly-held aesthetics.



In the specific case of the PLC, we find the following among the most poignant points of convergence with historical workers' literature: 1) a critique, be it explicit or inferred, to the conditions of labour and labourers (supplemented by the specific contingency of migrancy by the PLC authors); 2) a pronounced effort to produce a form of culture that workers can claim as their own, based on their centrality and active participation, and that other workers beyond the original writers themselves can identify with; 3) a conceptualisation of mediators as carrying on the legacy of intellectuals who worked as instructors for worker and peasant writers during the Mao era. Most importantly, the concept of *new workers' literature* itself is grounded on the connection with old workers' literature, while at the same time recognising the all-too-obvious historical differences with the previous period.

While the link appears clear and transparent through critical analysis, and it is explicitly pointed out by several actors (including activists and mediators in the PLC, or other critics presented in chapter Two, including Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Ji), authors themselves find little to no inspiration in previous instances of workers' literature—and working-class culture in general. This imaged discontinuity is due to a number of reasons, only some of which can be inferred from authors' statements during our interviews, or from their actual writing practice. These includes the end of class politics and the pervasive class discourse of the CCP, which only reinforces the stark contrast between the Mao and Reform eras; the bureaucratisation of the Mao-era literary endeavour, largely stripping authors of their creative agency and confining them to pre-set themes; and possibly, the fact that the regulated forms and repetitive content of worker-peasant-soldier literature must look unappealing to contemporary authors, much more interested in finding ways to express their own self.

In fact, Chinese workers' literature before and after the 1980s do not exactly share many similarities. Rather, and more importantly, they share common threads, basic characteristics, and underlying founding issues, thanks to which it makes sense to bridge these different historical

moments, instead of considering them as separate. One of the conclusions of this thesis is precisely that they are internal, complex constituents of the dialectical totality of workers' literature—and that its contemporary manifestations have a history and a tradition, a sequence of continuities, interruptions, changes and frictions that need to be taken into account to acquire the whole picture of this reality.

*Plural writing: a massively single number*

The analysis of case studies has confirmed the impossibility for any comprehensive study of workers' literature to deal with the individual without considering not only the social, but also the collective. This fact is amply clear also from a comparative textual analysis. There is an abundance of the singular I in the “new poetry” (*xin shi* 新诗) of the early decades of the 20th century, especially in its modernist and romantic variants. The same trend can be found among the Obscure poets of the 1980s, the first relevant resurgence of poetic fervour following the bureaucratisation of literature in the PRC. In “Huida” 回答 (Answer), often considered a manifesto of Obscure poetry, Bei Dao utters a cry that comes from the depths of the individual self: “I—do—not—believe!” (我——不——相——信). Here the individual is claiming the right to question any “revealed truth” and advance their own understanding of the world. For sure, Obscure poetry also contained a lot of “We,” especially when poets were thinking of their own generation. Nevertheless, a stress on individuality was among the main characteristics of both these poetic waves—a newfound individuality following centuries of the poet's blending with state officialdom in the case of New Poetry, and a return to the self and introspection after the traumas of the Cultural Revolution among Obscure poets. The latter also participated in a more general “inwards” turn of literature that encompassed the novel as well, with avant-garde experimentations and “private writing” (*sirenhua xiezu* 私人化写作) as its most evident manifestations.

The question is tangled and thorny when it comes to workers' literature. As we have seen, workers' literature tends to be extremely subjective, focused on one individual's (usually the author's) life experience, seldom addressed to others or conjuring up an explicit We. However, the content of the vast majority of workers' literature—definitely of almost the totality of prose and poetry analysed in this thesis—explicitly or implicitly refers to conditions that concern migrant workers as a class. One of the most compelling features of workers' literature is its ability to paint a picture of a social situation that is collectively experienced by its author together with millions of other peers. This characteristic is also what moves van Crevel to provocatively ask, with reference to Zheng Xiaoqiong and Xiao Hai: “aren't [they] in fact alike? Isn't the desire to offer testimony of social injustice central to both? Isn't what both speakers express most of all solidarity and commiseration with their co-workers (and little in the way of hope)?” And indeed most (not all) worker authors present themselves as “omniscient narrator and advocate of the good cause, observer-*cum*-protagonist, social commentator, autobiographer.”<sup>4</sup> I agree with van Crevel's argument that these traits invite us to reconsider what we mean by literature, or rather the different meanings and uses literature takes on in different contexts. Yet, the fact alone that workers' writings can seem “in fact alike” is indicative of this constant interplay between the singular and plural. I contend that this fact is true for the vast majority of worker authors.

It is a vital question of workers' literature, then, to make sense of the relation between individual/singular and collective/plural. This relation is ambivalent. It fluctuates between the open assertion of belonging to the wider community (class?) of migrant labourers through the frequent use of plural pronouns, the constant sense of collectiveness, the reciprocity of I and We, on the one hand, and the declarations of individuality made by authors, on the other. Such declarations can be either explicit, for example by asserting the uniqueness of their work or even their dislike for the overarching definition of *worker author*, or artistic, i.e. through styles or forms that are

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<sup>4</sup> Van Crevel, “No One in Control?”, 172–173.

indistinguishably their own. Now, any author's production is internally complex or contradictory, and therefore this question probably escapes any catch-it-all resolution. More importantly, however, this question should not be understood in a binary way, either separating author and text from their context, or downplaying them as a mere repetition of the same thing (factory, labour) over and over. The problem is not so much to settle whether an author is writing about themselves or about migrant workers in general, but rather to analyse how they accomplish both tasks simultaneously—and how these two elements coexist even when just unconsciously.

Furthermore, plurality can also be understood in a historical sense, and involve the relationship of contemporary, post-1980s workers' literature with the previous incarnations of literary productions on the part of the working class in China. Up until the 1970s, workers' literature, in its stages as proletarian literature and worker-peasant-soldier literature, had an eminently collective, plural character. The collective nature of labour and workers' social conditions was greatly emphasised, with the goal of stirring labourers up to the task of attacking the feudal and bourgeois society, or to participate in the (collective) endeavour of socialist construction. It was a collective breath also determined by the fact that this specific type of workers' literature responded to precise political requirements. The case is entirely different for post-1980s workers' literature, where such requirements have disappeared and individuality plays a much greater role, also due to the influence of the prevailing trends in the literary scene overall. Yet, as this thesis has demonstrated, they share several basic features, and constitute different declinations of the same literary enterprise to produce writings by workers, for workers, about workers. It is in the historical variations of this enterprise, even more than in its similarities through time, that lies the validity of an approach that considers contemporary migrant workers as part of a larger history of Chinese workers' literature. In addition to their aesthetic aspects, these variations can also offer precious glimpses into the changes in workers' consciousness and their literary mind with China's shift to capitalism.

Given all the above considerations, and based on its textual, metatextual and contextual analysis, this thesis is a validation of Pozzana's suggestion to read the I in migrant workers' literature "as an 'us' representing any worker."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps there is no better image to express this fact than that of the "massively single number" (*pangda de danshu* 庞大的单数) coined by Guo Jinniu. Each worker author is undoubtedly individual and subjective, especially today; and yet, this individuality and subjectivity is an autonomous component of a vast plurality, to whose narrative it adds something original. Its massive proportions are due not only to the questions it raises, but above all by its being a collective subject. Individual stories and experiences are speaking both in the singular and the plural. Nothing shows it more efficiently and graphically than poetry readings and other literary performances where literature truly becomes a means for aggregation and public discussion, which is also true for the PLC as an institution. The richness of images and tropes through which they are expressed compose an "industrial polyphony"<sup>6</sup> that provides valuable lens for understanding the worker's condition in China and beyond.

### *A challenge to literary conventions*

This thesis has consistently moved along two trails to encompass all the constituents of the phenomenon studies, that is the social factors concerning *workers* and the specificities of *literature*. We have seen how worker authors display original and sometimes unexpected literary references, which all contribute to forming up a rich and variegated patchwork of intertextuality. The "literary matter" is not handled by worker authors merely as a tool to tell the story of their life. On the contrary, it is taken very seriously by its practitioners, who are generally kept out of the "temple of literature" (i.e. from recognition as producers of "authentic," "true" literature) only by the existing

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<sup>5</sup> Pozzana, "Poetry," 193.

<sup>6</sup> I am borrowing this image from Tamburello, *Quando la poesia si fa operaia*, 75.

cultural politics. Precisely also for this very reason, the practice of worker authors defies historical, institutional and aesthetic conventions, and that alone demonstrates that they have something new to bring onto the literary field.

The Introduction briefly introduced the internal divisions of China's field of literary production on the basis of Fang Wei's scheme, which compartmentalises writers according to their economic capital (or the pursuit of it through commodified literature), socio-political status (which includes adherence to the mainstream ideology, membership in state institutions such as the Writers' Association, etc.), and aesthetic commitments (either low or high, and in the latter case, loyal to the orientations of state cultural politics or more socially critical). Fang Wei then summarily divides authors between those who are fully "official" (high economic capital, high social status, ideological adherence, varying aesthetic commitment, but often high or recognised as such), those who consider writing a business (high economic capital, varying social status, low aesthetic commitment), and finally the outsiders (low economic capital and social status, high aesthetic commitment, often critical).<sup>7</sup> Worker authors today, and specifically those from the PLC analysed in the thesis, evade these distinctions. The majority of them are at the crossroads, more or less pushed towards one direction or another, or incorporating traits belonging to more than one of the types singled out by Fang Wei. Of course they would seem to belong with the "outsiders," and yet many critics would find it hard to consider their aesthetic quality "high" (as many are considered artistically insufficient), while many worker authors themselves would be more oriented towards the first type, not only in the hope of accessing it (i.e. becoming writers fully recognised as such by the cultural powers that be), but rather as role models for what writers should be, especially in opposition to marketable literature.

This "in-betweenness" is displayed with even stronger evidence in their aesthetic choices. If we borrow again van Crevel's distinction between the "Elevated" and the "Earthy," we would be

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<sup>7</sup> Fan Wei, "Zuojia shenfen."

automatically tempted to collocate worker authors in the “Earthly” camp, precisely because no one would be more authorised and/or inclined to address social themes than them. Yet this would be a superficial vision of contemporary workers’ literature, it not an outright prejudicial one. By reading authors’ metatextual interventions and availing itself of the interviews conducted during fieldwork, this thesis has repeatedly shown that worker authors’ main goal is to write well. The PLC itself was born to provide a space where migrant workers could engage in literature and writing in general, without setting any particular conditions for what could be considered “workers’ literature.” Writing well means first of all learning from well-established writers and poets, or from the heroes of the literary tradition. In part, this is also a way to acquire a greater symbolic capital, demonstrating that worker authors are perfectly able to emulate the literature that is considered to be “Elevated” (they are already “Earthly” enough due to their social condition). For now, no worker author or group, and certainly not the PLC, is pursuing any kind of “Rupture” like the iconoclast movement promoted by Zhu Wen, Han Dong 韩东 and Dong Xi 东西 in the late 1990s to proclaim their explicit and defiant self-determination from literary canons. An individual who is struggling to be called a poet despite the obstacles posed by her or his social background would hardly join Yi Sha’s 伊莎 irreverent call to “starve the poets” (*esi shiren* 诗人)—a statement that is as “Earthly” as it gets in terms of aesthetics and standpoint, but absolutely sacrilegious, and it is not hard to see why it would not be the ideal primary source of inspiration for someone who is trying to “elevate” themselves from the “earth” of socio-cultural subalternity. On the contrary, the symbolic authority of literary institutions, canons and history continues to be strong among worker authors today. That is undoubtedly also the mixed result of the general depoliticisation of China’s society, the absence of a recognised institution—or even just a widespread and participated theoretical discussions—on the terms of what is called *workers’ literature*.

Of course this is true in general terms. As we have already remarked, writers’ literature today is internally variegated, complex and even contradictory. There are authors who take very different

approaches, but that only reinforces the conclusion that it would be impossible to consider workers' literature, or individual worker authors, as fully "Elevated" or "Earthly." These narratives from workers bring something new into the literary field also in this respect. In general, even when they are faithful representations of a reality, they are never reduced to pure mimesis, but are also proposals for ways to carry forward this representation. As we have seen, such proposals are firmly grounded in a web of intertext with various traditions and trends of Chinese literature, but older and recent. Sometimes they are conscious, other times their presence is spotted by reading and research, but in both cases they show that worker authors can be discussed also from a fully literary perspective. Awarding them full literary dignity is the necessary precondition for reading them not only as accounts but also as perspectives.

Recognising how worker authors objectively step in the larger field of literary production in China and even challenge the way we generally think of it would also be a way to get out of sterile debates on "literary value." These debates, especially when they do not question what we mean by literary value and the aesthetic ideology that is at the basis of it, usually only end up replicating the dichotomy of social relevance and artistic value. The fact that our analysis has frequently shown how worker authors take inspiration from prominent writers and poets in China's literary scene, whose literary value is almost taken for granted (although the claim cannot be universalised) should not lead readers to think that it has fallen in the same pitfall it tried to avoid, i.e. critiquing the hegemony of a certain idea of literary value based on dominant aesthetics, but then bringing it back in by using it to demonstrate why workers authors can be considered artistically valuable. Far from being a criterion for assessing value, this reality only points to the fact that many worker authors creatively reuse the inspiration they acquired from the literary trends they are mainly exposed to, integrating them in the works, to make them more sophisticated and, in turn, integrated in the organic whole of the literary scene. The perspective adopted by this thesis has focused on the dialectic unity of the two, instead of their separation. Workers' literature has an artistic value *and* a



social value. The two are inseparable in the living, contradictory aesthetics already operative in their writing practice. Undoubtedly, it is a practice that undermines existing standards, but it also repositions them or creates new ones.

*The voice(s) we are hearing*

When it comes to the process of production of workers' literature, authors themselves are not the end of the story. The agents that we have identified as activists and mediators play a crucial role in shaping the current incarnation(s) of workers' literature. Although this thesis has methodologically privileged an author-based approach, the *by* alone does not guarantee a class-based perspective. This element compels us to wonder how much space for autonomous creative action worker authors really have. The question has deep roots in history, as chapter One has shown. These agents influence authors' literary training, which is fundamental to shape their aesthetic sensibilities, and the spaces where they can be more easily received and published, which in turn may have an impact on how these authors present themselves to other agents and institutions in the field. The array of forces that operate in shaping up the current incarnation(s) of workers' literature should therefore remind us that authors are never the exclusive agents in the production of literature, and that we should therefore capture the complexity behind the "authenticity" of subaltern "self-narratives."

Does it mean that, once again, we are getting only a filtered voice on the part of workers? Are these narratives unauthentic? Is the subaltern truly unable to speak, to quote a famous statement? I do not think that the analysis in this thesis leads us to believe that that is the case. However, it would be ironic to deconstruct and de-fetishise the process of literary creation in general only to fall in the trap of reproducing a sort of romantic illusion that what we consider as workers' literature would be the authentic, unmediated, genuine voice of workers. It is a fundamental question of

method to keep in mind, like Couldry remarks, that “An attention to voice means paying attention, as importantly, to the conditions for effective voice, that is, the conditions under which people’s practices of voice are *sustained* and the outcome of those practices *validated*.”<sup>8</sup> With these elements in mind, I contend that this thesis convinces us to consider workers’ writings as expressions of their consciousness as individuals at the intersection between several different factors, including class subalternity based on the experience of labour and displacement, the influence of the literary canon or other literary references, the impact of the agents engaged in the process of creation and distribution of their work, and so on. In this sense, these narratives are absolutely *authentic* and should be approached as such. Authenticity does not mean that there is no kind of mediation. On the contrary, mediation itself must be identified as one of the elements at play in the process of creation to dissect how it influences the final product and the author’s creative mind.

To the point that individual works and authors share common traits, especially for what concerns their message and content (but also form, in some respects, for example in the abundance of technical vocabulary), we can also infer a more general mood, beyond the individual alone and indicative of the consciousness of the class as well. This point is also worthy of more scholarly investigation, which goes beyond the scope of this thesis, concentrated as it is on one major case study. Yet, the variety of sensibilities found in the course of the analysis of the authors who form the individual case studies of the thesis, especially but not exclusively with respect to the functions and responsibilities of workers’ literature today towards the formation of class consciousness, leads me to agree with Qiu Linchuan and Wang Hongzhe’s observation that “Given the inner variety of Chinese new workers, as well as the complex relationship between workers and other social strata, power structures, and the market, a united working-class voice will hardly come by in the near

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<sup>8</sup> Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 113.

period” (考慮到中國新工人的內部多樣性，以及工人和其他社會階層、權力機構、市場之間的複雜關係，一個統一的工人階級聲音在短期內較難出現).<sup>9</sup>

While this may be true, the voices that have come by and that we are hearing are giving much food for thought, that this thesis has hopefully been able to transmit and summarise. In these voices we find a considerable deal of past, both in the form of rural childhood memories, and echoes of the previous experiences of working-class cultural projects. Of course, the present is all over the place: the experience of the city, alienation, labour, wasted youth, fatigue, social imbalances form the core subject-matter of the works that have been read by this thesis. The future seems to be absent. I assert that the sprouts of future are bourgeoning in these extraordinary portrayals of the present, and of course the past. Zheng Xiaoqiong has said that those who do not think about their present may be safe from suffering and anguishing, but they also resign themselves to a grim existence not so different from machines.<sup>10</sup> We can hear an echo from Lu Xun’s immortal depiction of hope as a road that is made when people walk it. Literature is proving a valid instrument for workers to escape this grim destiny and express their three-dimensional subjectivity beyond the dullness of the shopfloor or other similar situations. Through writing, these worker authors open up new perspectives on their past and present, and can offer new visions for a meaningful future.

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<sup>9</sup> Wang Hongzhe and Qiu Linchuan, “Kongjian, jiqiao, yu shengyin,” 50.

<sup>10</sup> Zheng Xiaoqiong, *Nü Gongji*, 10.

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## *Appendix: Interview Questions*

### **Structured part**

Age

Occupation

Education (how many years of school, how long ago?)

Regional origin

Parental background

### **Open questions**

#### General situation

- What is your job? How long have you done it? Did you have different occupation(s) before?
- What brought you to Beijing? Did you go to other places before?
- Would you identify yourself as *xin gongren*?
- What do you think of/associate with *xin gongren*, *nongmingong*, *dagong*?
- What kind of cultural activities do you enjoy doing in your free time?

#### Picun

- Was participation in the Picun literature group crucial in your decision to start writing?
- Do you enjoy poetry recitals, including of your own poems? Why?
- I saw you were lectured on Yan'an talks and literature. What do you think about it? Are you interested in it? Have you ever read any *gongnongbing* poetry? Do you find it interesting and why?

## Writing

- What took you into writing in the first place? Why and when did you start writing?
  
- What are your favourite writers and poets, both Chinese and foreign? Do you consider them as inspirations for your work?
  
- Do you read other *dagong* authors? Do you like them?
  
- Why do you prefer writing poetry/short stories?
  
- What do you want to express through your writing? Do you think your life experience is important for the way and what you write?
  
- What is writing to you? Why do you write? Do you have any goal you want to achieve through writing?

## Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

L'estratto (max. 1000 battute) deve essere redatto sia in lingua italiana che in lingua inglese e nella lingua straniera eventualmente indicata dal Collegio dei docenti.

L'estratto va firmato e rilegato come ultimo foglio della tesi.

Studente: Federico Picerni \_\_\_\_\_ matricola: 956424 \_\_\_\_\_

Dottorato: Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa \_\_\_\_\_

Ciclo: 34 \_\_\_\_\_

Titolo della tesi<sup>1</sup> : The Aesthetics of Labour. Social and Textual Practice of the Picun Literature Group \_\_\_\_\_

Abstract:

La tesi studia la produzione del Gruppo letterario di Picun, composto da lavoratori migranti dalla campagna in città, in relazione agli studi di letteratura cinese contemporanea e di letterature working-class globali. Essa viene inquadrata nella più vasta scena della letteratura operaia in Cina e considerata un valido esempio per studiare come l'interazione fra vari attori contribuisca a modellare le sensibilità estetiche dei lavoratori nella Cina postsocialista. La prima parte della tesi delinea le principali questioni teoriche riguardanti la letteratura operaia, discute la produzione accademica in lingua cinese e inglese sull'argomento, ed esamina la storia e la composizione del Gruppo letterario di Picun come pratica sociale e creazione di comunità. La seconda parte passa all'analisi testuale con la presentazione di cinque casi di studio, esplorando diversi generi e stili, per evidenziare l'interrelazione fra i testi e il contesto culturale in cui si trovano gli autori. La tesi punta a dimostrare che la letteratura operaia mette in discussione le concezioni estetiche dominanti grazie alla sua combinazione di valore sociale e artistico.

This thesis investigates the literary production of the Picun Literature Group, made up of rural–urban migrant workers, placing it against the background of contemporary Chinese literature studies and global working-class literature studies. The literary production of the group is addressed as a component of the larger scene of workers' literature in China and a valid example to study how the interaction of various actors contributes to shaping workers' aesthetic sensibilities in post-socialist China. The first part of the thesis outlines the main theoretical questions around working-class literature, discusses Chinese- and English-language scholarship on post-1980s workers' literature, and examines the history and composition of the Picun Literature Group to in terms of social practice and community making. The second part moves to textual analysis by presenting five case studies, with different genres and styles, allowing the discussion to highlight the interrelation between texts and the cultural context worker authors are immersed in. The thesis aims to demonstrate that workers' literature compels to question dominant aesthetic conceptions through its combination of social significance and artistic value.

Firma dello studente

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<sup>1</sup> Il titolo deve essere quello definitivo, uguale a quello che risulta stampato sulla copertina dell'elaborato consegnato.