

The Worker-Poet as the Ethnographic Partner: Documenting the Emotional Pain of Rural Migrant Women

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This 17-year-old girl from Hunan screams as if a boulder has just crushed her
This nocturnal outburst, as if erupting from her blood vein, shakes the entire dorm
Lying there awake and unable to sleep, I feel the oppression closing in
Alternating between panting and night shout, the shriek from this quiet rural
migrant woman
pierces through the noise of this hectic industrial age, like a battle cry.
—Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 *Stories of Migrant Women Workers* (2012)

Introduction

Toward the end of 2017, the Chinese poet Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 received an unexpected email from Frederik Bous, a German composer. The composer wanted to write a symphonic piece about the nocturnal scream of Zhou Yangchun 周阳春, one of the one hundred women featured in Zheng's

(2012) *Nü Gong Ji* 女工记 (*Stories of Migrant Women Workers*).¹ In his message to Zheng, the composer said that, when he came across Zheng's poems, he felt that he had to do something with the poem, as he "could no longer take anything else seriously." In response, Zheng wrote,

I'm very glad that the story of Zhou Yangchun will be heard in a different artistic form. I also wanted to say that a key message from this particular poem is that the nightly scream is an expression of life wishing to assert itself in circumstances of repression. The industrial assembly line is reminiscent of the scene of tightening bolts in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. My portrait of Zhou Yangchun is a portrait of someone who was about to turn into that bolt-tightening man in the film. I have written about this in a prose piece called "The Assembly Line."²

The scream of the migrant worker, composed as an orchestral work, was performed in several cities in Germany in 2018. To scholars interested in the experience of China's rural migrant women, the migrant woman's scream in Zheng's poem and in the composer's orchestral piece may bring to mind another nocturnal scream narrated by labor sociologist Pun Ngai (2005). Pun worked and lived with migrant women in an electronics factory in southern China for a few months and witnessed firsthand the emotional anguish of some of her coworkers/research participants. The ways in which a sociologist, a poet, and then a composer make sense of a migrant woman's nocturnal scream points to a disjuncture in the attempt to give shape to an individual's feelings, which can be ephemeral, embodied, visceral, often prelinguistic. Each attempt, in its own genre/form, is trying to find a way of representing a human experience that can be ineffable and personal and may elude the language that seeks to capture it. Yet, when juxtaposed, they also seem to afford the hopeful possibility of overcoming that elusiveness.

Sociologists of emotion have clearly demonstrated that inequality necessarily translates into a stratification of our "capacity to achieve socially and historically situated forms of happiness and well-being" (Illouz 2007: 73). People who occupy different positions in the socioeconomic and gender hierarchy may, as Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003) suggests, end up having different emotional experiences and inhabiting different emotional worlds in their pursuit of this goal. In light of this, unless the field of inequal-

ity studies addresses questions about the pursuit of social justice, dignity, and happiness at the level of personal intimate experience, and unless it develops approaches that are capable of studying emotion empirically, the ethical foundations of inequality studies will remain shallow. It is necessary, therefore, for scholars concerned with the subaltern experience to move from abstract knowledge to lived experience; it is equally necessary that conventional scholarship finds a way to inform, enrich, and strengthen itself by drawing on nourishment from genres other than academic research publications.

In methodological terms, this means figuring out three things. First, how do we investigate “matters of the heart,” particularly when the heart is tired and broken? Second, how do we document intimacy, which, by its very nature, usually takes place away from the gaze of the public, including that of the researcher doing fieldwork? Third, how do we go about writing about subaltern subjects/objects, who may come out of an intimate relationship feeling hurt, abandoned, sad, or angry, but who may not be willing or able to express these emotions verbally? How do we ethnographers ensure that empirical knowledge does not slip through the possible “gap between the realms of consciousness and unconsciousness” (Pun 2005: 187), between language and the prelinguistic, between thoughts and emotions, between words and the body?

Acutely aware of the need to tackle these questions, Judith Farquhar (2002: 5), in her ethnographic work on sex, food, and body practices in postsocialist China, observes that the “tool kit of ethnography must be expanded.” She calls for a kind of “methodological creativity” that involves “uniting an anthropology of the body and an anthropology of discourses and practices.” She also repeatedly refers to writers—novelists, news reporters, authors of self-help literature—as her “allies” (18), who are “very skilled ethnographic partners,” and “wonderful anthropological partners” (24), whose works, through adherence to realism, hold out much “ethnographic promise” (18) and “ethnographic riches,” and present valuable opportunities to ethnography (24).

This article takes seriously the question that Pun (2005: 167) raises: What can we do with data, such as the rural migrant’s scream, that are “invisible, as well as nonlinguistic,” and that come “directly from the body of a subal-

tern; from a person who [is] often excluded in and from the written”? This article engages with these questions, and it is best read as an exploratory and experimental exercise aimed at working through some of these methodological questions. While Farquhar is an anthropologist who has discovered the empirical usefulness of media and cultural texts, I am a media and cultural studies researcher who has produced ethnographic knowledge of media and cultural production and consumption. We are united by both an agnostic attitude about the reliability of ethnography, and a commitment to producing it.

Taking a cue from Farquhar, this article is a cultural and sociological reading of Zheng’s *Stories of Migrant Women Workers*. My approach to Zheng’s poems is neither literary nor aesthetic. Instead, I approach her stories in order to address three specific questions, discussed in each of the sections below, after a brief detour via the poet’s biography: First, what sociological knowledge can we extrapolate from these stories, and in what ways do they offer extra sociological value? Second, in what sense can we say that Zheng is one of what Farquhar (2002: 24) calls “wonderful anthropological partners”? Third, what is Zheng’s political agenda vis-à-vis the state, transnational capital, the middle class, and scholars? The empirical material in this article comes primarily from three sources: the stories of women narrated in Zheng’s collection; the poet’s field notes, which she shared with me, and public statements documenting her ongoing struggle to make sense of workers’ pain and suffering; and, to a lesser extent, my extensive conversations with the poet herself about the cultural politics of giving voice to her coworkers. Throughout the article I seek to situate existing academic writings on rural migrants alongside Zheng’s stories, with the purpose of constructing an otherwise absent dialogue between these two bodies of work, thereby aiming to identify a possible shared space in which a productive partnership between academic and subaltern writers can be forged.

From Migrant Worker to Literary Editor

Rural migrant worker poets writing about the labor and lives of rural migrants are mostly men, and mostly from the first-generation cohort who moved to China’s most rapidly growing cities in the 1980s and 1990s. Zheng

Xiaoqiong is one of the few women poets with a rural background. Born in 1980, she straddles the two generational cohorts (older migrants and the 1980s cohort).

Born in a farming village in Nanchong, Sichuan Province, Zheng completed a nursing apprenticeship at a local technical college, and, at the age of twenty-one, moved to Dongguan, Guangdong Province, to try her luck. For several years she worked in a factory that produced hardware. Referred to by her coworkers and line managers as “No. 245” (her place identifier on the assembly line) and charged with the daily task of punching holes in pieces of iron using supersonic equipment, Zheng experienced firsthand the profound effect of industrial alienation. However, instead of losing her capacity for feelings and creativity, like her many rural migrant poet counterparts she turned her hand to writing poems about life on the assembly line as a crucial means of coping with alienation (Sun 2012). Her earliest group of poems, *Huangma Ling* 黄麻岭 (*Jute Hill*), which appeared in 2006, documents how the industrial machine robs youth from those fresh-faced and hot-blooded workers like herself (Zheng X. 2008). Workplace injuries abounded, and Zheng once had the tip of one of her fingers clipped off by the machine. The publication of *Jute Hill* won many accolades, establishing Zheng as one of the earliest and most powerful rural migrant poets writing on industrial themes.

Given the nature of her work, it is not surprising that metal, especially iron, appears as the most recurring and prominent motif in Zheng’s poetry, vividly and imaginatively evoking the sensations of the human body under the impact—literal or metaphorical—of metal (chopped fingers, crushed limbs, bruised skin, piercing metallic assaults on the eardrums). She has also been described as “China’s Ginsberg” (He 2011), based on her series of poems under the title *Renxing Tianqiao* 人行天桥 (*Pedestrian Overpass*, 2009), featuring an individual, crushed and twisted by the pressure of industrial regime, howling at the world from the top of a pedestrian overpass. Her poems have been translated into English, German, Japanese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, French, Spanish, and Korean, and she has been invited to talk about her work in the United States, Europe, Australia, and Asian countries. In 2015, German theater director K. Baumbecker took his plays, which were based on Zheng’s poems, to be staged in Beijing, and Zheng’s

poem “An Iron Nail” was performed in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 2018, featuring two percussionists on the stage and the voice of the poet herself.

Throughout the first decade of her life as a migrant worker and writer, the accolades that were showered on Zheng did not change her life as a factory worker. Occasional literary grants and awards gave her a temporary reprieve from life on the assembly line. Throughout the first decade of the 2000s Zheng’s life was, in her own words, a chronic traversing between factory and literary activities, between quitting jobs, being sacked, and finding new jobs—all the while trying to turn her experience and observations into poetry.

Zheng’s reputation as a writer grew steadily, and she became a member of the Guangdong Province Writers’ Association in 2007 and, from 2008 to 2013, served as delegate to the People’s Congress of Guangdong Province. Nowadays, instead of facing the daily, repetitive, and monotonous work of the assembly line, Zheng works as an editor of a literary magazine based in Guangzhou, spending her working hours commissioning, editing, and proofreading articles and talking to writers. But she still describes herself as a migrant worker on her blog, still lives among other rural migrants, and is anxious not to let her elevated status create any distance between herself and the workers who remain at the heart of her writing (Li 2015). In fact, Zheng’s desire to stay close to the lives of rural migrants has only intensified since she became a professional editor. Determined to pursue her project of writing about these women, Zheng decided to live in Dalang, a suburb in Dongguan, home to many rural migrants, to ensure that she kept one foot on the ground. Instead of living like a white-collar professional in Guangzhou, she opted to commute between Dongguan and Guangzhou, thus negotiating, on daily basis, the journey from industrial complex to metropolitan space, from assembly line to urban central business district. The “amphibian” nature of Zheng’s relationship with the rural migrant community—as both an insider and outsider—affords her a perspective that is much more intimate than any scholar can dream of achieving. As Zheng (pers. comm., 2016) puts it:

I preferred to live in the chaotic “village in the city,” among migrant workers. Every day, I’d come across burglars, prostitutes, peddlers, cob-

blers, garbage collectors, construction workers, gamblers, drug dealers, thieves, and, of course, the unemployed. I moved among them every day. On a day in May 2007, I unexpectedly received an award for some of my poems, and journalists came looking for me, hoping to interview me. I was worried that my neighbors would find out and stop talking to me about their lives, so I told the journalists not to come to my place but instead meet me in a park nearby.

A number of male *dagong* 打工 (worker) poets I interviewed between 2011 and 2013 all expressed unreserved admiration for her work. But success is a word that Zheng feels uneasy about. She is known to have turned down the initial offer to join the Guangdong Province Writers' Association, insisting that her place as a *dagong* writer was in the factory. However, she is now a truly institutionalized literary bureaucrat and part of China's literary establishment, on the payroll of a government-funded writers' association. But this position also enables her to explore ways of engaging in literary activism among workers. One thing she feels strongly about is to restore dignity to people in this social cohort who have for a long time existed as a faceless, voiceless collective. In December 2017, sponsored by the Guangdong Province Writers' Association and hosted by the magazine *Literary Works* (*Zuopin* 作品), a poetry reading event celebrating the creativity and life of ordinary workers was held in the factory of Dongguan's largest manufacturer of women's shoes. Poets who were also assembly line workers went onstage to read their poems, with some eight hundred fellow workers in the audience in the factory's auditorium. On the day of the poetry reading event *Our Voices*, Zheng sent me several pictures via WeChat that she had taken of the auditorium with the name cards of each of the attendees prominently displayed on their seats—in the same manner as the names of delegates to the Party Congress are displayed. In Zheng's (pers. comm., 2017) WeChat message, she explains that "there were 800 workers in the auditorium that day. It took us a long time to type out their names and prepare a name card for each of them, but we wanted to do it to show respect to everyone. Behind these name cards lies the dignity of each worker."

The Sociology of Pain

The pain inflicted by the industrial machine is both physical and emotional, and is experienced by both male and female workers. But as Pun Ngai's (2005) ethnography documents, industrial time management regime and the modes of production of the assembly line are particularly at odds with the natural rhythm of the female body, and the disruption and alienation that these processes inflict on the migrant women, including exposure to the chemical toxicity of the factory environment, manifest themselves in myriad symptoms of physical pain. Zheng writes about their sickly, frail bodies, their feverish cheeks, their labored breath, and the headaches, dizziness, palpitations, and myriad unnamable pains they suffer as a result of their industrialized working lives. With a delicate touch, she writes about Dong Weiping 董卫平, a feeble young woman on the assembly line who is overwhelmed by the pain of dysmenorrhea:

She is timid and fearful
 She tells me she has period cramps
 For a couple of days, she is crimson-faced from enduring pain
 But she dare not ask for a day off
 Certain that the line supervisor will not approve
 The smell of welding on the shop floor makes her sick
 But she says she is getting used to it
 She wants to work extra shifts
 So she can send money back home to Yunnan.
 (Zheng X. 2012: 113)

Many of the women in Zheng's poems experience pain-related symptoms similar to those listed by Pun, but Zheng goes further, to demonstrate how the industrial machine harms women's reproductive capacities, and what the ramifications of this are on her intimate life. The experience of thirty-five-year-old Chou Rong 仇容 from Jiangxi Province testifies to this. Sixteen years ago, Chou and her husband left their one-year-old son back in the village and became workers in the Pearl River Delta. Over the years, she has worked in electronics plants, toy factories, and shoe factories, her only way of connecting with her son being a "telephone line." Chou gave birth to her

second child at the age of thirty-four, but the child was born prematurely and disabled, and died soon after birth. She was told that too many toxic chemicals had lodged in her body. Now, at the age of thirty-five, she can feel that the organs in her body are slowly giving out, even though she cannot see them:

Clock in, clock out
 Her meager wages keep her and her family going
 She dare not imagine the future
 Diseases spreading inside the body
 Tears no longer come to her eyes
 Meanwhile, her hands, feet, eyes, heart, flesh, and bones slowly dry up,
 age,
 And will eventually perish when she dies.
 (Zheng X. 2012: 109–10)

Here we see Zheng the poet and Pun Ngai the academic researcher reinforce each other, establishing convincingly the prevalence of chronic pain that the industrial machine inflicts on the female working body. However, while Pun chooses to view these workers' bodily dysfunctions—menstrual pain, sickness, fainting—as possible forms of “resistance” and “challenge” to the disciplinary power, Zheng seems less sanguine.

Perhaps for a similar reason, Zheng is also less sanguine than some scholars about the consequences of mobility on migrant women. The existing literature suggests that a key motivation for migration for young women is to avoid early marriage and childbirth and to secure a better future (Beynon 2004). Freed from parental control and living in the anonymous city, women feel less constrained by gender conventions and enjoy relative autonomy and freedom to choose an ideal mate (Gaetano 2004). While Zheng does not disagree with this view, in terms of the motivation that drives these women to undertake their hopeful journeys, her stories present less evidence of actual freedom and liberation. We come across very few examples of women falling in love, sharing romantic moments, enjoying sexual intimacy, or becoming emotionally strong and independent. Instead, we see a recurring narrative of violence, injury, and suffering inflicted on their bodies—venereal disease, repeated abortions, damaged uteruses, unwanted births—as a result of their

encounters with men, be they boyfriends, abusive husbands, bosses, or paying clients.

Migrant women's labor is emotional as well as physical. While transnational capital extracts surplus value from her labor on the assembly line, the intimate relationships that these women get caught up in often also often prove to be harmful rather than nurturing (see Mun Young Cho's article in this issue). And herein lies the extra sociological value of Zheng's stories, in her detailed and rich accounts of what happens to these migrant women workers—women such as Zhou Xiaozhi 周小紫:

At 19, she fell for him, got pregnant, still below marriageable age
 In a textile factory in Dongguan
 Her family was against it, but she gave birth to his first daughter
 No marriage certificate, no wedding banquets, no wedding photos, only
 bitter tears
 When she had labor pains, she felt the warmth of his love
 At 21, she had two abortions, one in a small clinic and another in a big
 hospital
 She got infected, her womb having been scraped clean
 The pains still plague her today
 At 24, she gave birth to a son
 They went to get a marriage certificate, only to find
 They had to pay a fine for violating family planning
 At 26, he had an affair with a colleague and got her pregnant
 They split up after that, the two children still living with grandma in
 the village.
 (Zheng X. 2012: 202)

Zheng's stories document, in minute detail, the bodily pain endured by migrant women workers that is caused by the disciplinary techniques of the industrial machine, and the range of emotions—from disappointment to a sense of violation—that follow breakups with their boyfriends/lovers. But to Zheng these are not the only causes of pain. Many of the poems in her book chronicle the anguish that plagues some women as they struggle to live out the daily clash between village- and kinship-based codes of sociality, on the one hand, and the highly transient, mobile, and individuated styles of social

interaction that are typical of city life, on the other. To quite a few women in Zheng's book, this pain is a result of their displacement from the past and from their village life, and an inability to reconcile this past with their current life. Zheng is grappling with a nuanced array of feelings and memories that often elude academic narratives—even for scholars who are explicitly concerned with emotion.

In the eyes of her peers, Xie Fang 谢芳 has done quite well. A native of rural Guizhou, one of China's poorest provinces and a major sending zone of migrant labor, Xie came to Dongguan and started as an assembly line worker in a hardware factory. She is married to a Guizhou man and has a four-year-old child. But Xie's village home, her husband and child who are still living there, and the marital life she had there prior to her coming to Dongguan, are all in the past for her. She now has another life, as personal assistant to the CEO of the company, mistress of a Taiwanese entrepreneur, and resident of a nice apartment that he rents for her. Xie is tormented by the double life she lives—the sweet memory of her first love, whom she has now deposited back in Guizhou, and the carnal enjoyment she gets in the bed of her Taiwanese lover. Her transgressive body feels pain and pleasure in equal measure. Zheng's poem about her documents a litany of emotions that Xie experiences on a daily basis: sadness, guilt, self-blame, confusion, loss, emptiness, and, above all, shame:

Her pure, tender heart is ripped apart
 In a corner of her heart she still feels warmth and happiness
 But the icy cold reality of Dongguan is equally hard to escape
 “What can I do if I go back to Guizhou?” she asks rhetorically, to justify
 staying
 She tries so hard to wipe out the memory of the past
 Only to find that the harder she tries, the more it hurts.
 (Zheng X. 2012: 221–22)

Many women who are the subjects of Zheng's poems are confronted with the question of how to turn their bodies into economic capital. Having few other resources, these women have to choose from among the few options that are available to them. While Xie opts to become the mistress of a Taiwanese businessman, others, like He Na 何娜, adopt a different sexual strat-

egy: she becomes a sex worker. To Zheng, He Na was merely going down the path that “many rural women in the city” had taken before her. She left home at the age of sixteen and, after starting out in a job on the assembly line, ended up working in a massage parlor. There, she worked her way up from being a “miss” (prostitute) to a “mammy” (*mami* 妈咪; madam, or the head of a brothel). Now, she drives a red car and is exploring a life whose moral order is “fragmented, broken, and chaotic.” Addressing He Na directly, Zheng writes,

You are still judged by the village when you go home
 But you are no longer controlled by the moral order of the village.
 “Everything comes at a price”: such is the rule of life . . .
 But somehow you can’t help remembering the past innocence,
 And your soul cannot go with the flow of time.
 You’re surprised by your own melancholia
 Seeing your ancestral village crumble before your eyes.
 (Zheng X. 2012: 125–26)

With these stories, Zheng lays bare the emotional cost of mobility, both on the family and on rural migrant women’s own personhood. They offer a rare glimpse of the mental anguish of individuals caught between their past and present lives, between traditional values of familial and conjugal loyalty and sexual strategies in a new sexual economy. If the emotional pain that comes from this sense of internal struggle is already acknowledged in the scholarly literature (e.g., by Tiantian Zheng [2009]), Zheng Xiaoqiong’s stories turn this scholarly insight into individuals in flesh and blood, so that we feel their pain in a visceral and acute way. None of these women appear to be gullible, nor do they seem to be morally deficient and in need of education and guidance, as the All-China Women’s Federation (Zhonghua Quanguo Funu Lianhehui 中华全国妇女联合会; often abbreviated as Fulian) would have us believe (Sun 2004). They are simply making decisions according to the logic of a new sexual economy that makes perfect sense to marginalized women who exist in a “culture of survival.”

By highlighting the sociological value of Zheng’s poems and juxtaposing them with the perspective of scholars, I do not aim to produce evidence of one being more “real” or “objective” than the other. I suggest that, when

taken together, the two corpora of works offer a richer and more multidimensional sense of migrant women workers' physical and emotional pains than either can offer alone.

The Surrogate Ethnographer

It took Zheng seven years to write *Stories of Migrant Women Workers*, and the original idea of writing a collection of poetry about women was prompted by a visit to a clinic in Dongguan, where Zheng learned that her former coworker had just had an abortion after splitting up with her boyfriend. The boyfriend had quit his job and left Dongguan, so he was not “in the picture anymore.” In conducting research for the book, Zheng talked to her coworkers, sometimes accompanying them to their hometowns to meet prospective marriage partners that had been arranged by their parents. She talked to young women who had just discovered that they were pregnant, or who had an abortion, or who had given birth to an unwanted baby and given it up for adoption, for a fee. She listened to the stories of women who worked in massage parlors and hair salons. She visited and wrote about a village in Hunan that had been transformed by the money remitted by young women who had gone into the sex trade. She wrote about girls who had to hire a “boyfriend” to protect themselves from violence and abuse, those who suffered violence and abuse because they could not afford such a “boyfriend,” and those who had moved up the ladder in the sex trade from prostitute to brothel owner. She wrote down the stories of women who could no longer bear a child, either due to repeated abortions in illegal clinics or through damage to their body because of excessive or unsafe sexual practices.

With her own experience of having worked in factories for six years and her intimate knowledge of the emotional lives of her female coworkers, Zheng wanted to become the voice of what she calls the “silent majority” (quoted in Jin 2013). That said, Zheng is clear that, while her earlier poems draw on her own experience, *Stories of Migrant Women Workers* does not. “In writing *Stories*, I shifted the focus from ‘me’ to ‘her,’ and these stories are about these women’s lives” (Huang 2012).

Although appearing in poetic form, the one hundred women whose sto-

ries are told in the book are all real, and Zheng decided to identify them by their real names—a practice that is at odds with the ethical protocols that govern academic researchers' data-reporting practices. She made this decision in order to reclaim the identity of these workers as individuals, not as replaceable and identical cogs in the industrial machine who exist as merely faceless statistics, to be quoted repeatedly in policy statements and media reports. Zheng (2012: 254–55) writes as follows in her field notes: “Every day, they exist as mere statistics. They are categorized, classified, sorted into groups, and then ignored and cast aside. . . . I want to extract these women from these faceless crowds and turn them into individuals who are daughters, mothers, wives . . . to say their names, where they come from, what they are doing now.” Zheng explained to me that many women wanted to see their real names recorded in the stories, whereas some, for reasons of privacy and confidentiality, opted to use only their given names or colloquial names.

While most literary texts are understood to be fictional, Zheng's stories are documentary—she has appropriated the genre of poetry in order to create a hitherto unavailable space for the vast amount of ethnographic evidence, whose validity is as reliable or unreliable as my own ethnographic accounts. While I do not in the least suggest that Zheng has an exclusive or more legitimate claim to authenticity in terms of perspective and experience, I argue that the ethnographic implications of her stories are manifold. First, they offer textual material from which we can mine ethnographic insights, as is evidenced in the last section. Her poetry adds to the thickness of ethnography by transforming a still life into a motion picture, by adding color, movement, and personality to the lives of the women whose lives she documents.

Second, her sustained proximity to these women, and her shared history with them, enables her to access their intimate experience (or at least the consequences of these experiences) at close range—something that is otherwise inaccessible or invisible to scholars. What often passes for idle gossip presents itself as valuable ethnographic material. This is evidenced in the poet's evocation of the life of seventeen-year-old Ah Qin 阿芹, originally from a remote and poverty-stricken village in Guizhou Province. With three years' schooling and no experience outside her village home, Ah Qin now works on the assembly line in a factory employing three thousand peo-

ple. She lives in Dormitory Section C, works on the shop floor in Section B, doing both day and night shifts, and she gradually learns to identify herself in terms of her work ID serial number and department of production. The snippets of idle chitchat between workers that Zheng weaves into her poem sound deliberately casual, to give the impression that the events they describe happen on a routine basis and do not warrant much fuss:

“A woman in C gave birth to a child in the toilet;
The baby nearly died,” says one worker
“Yes, indeed, I heard that the cleaner found the baby, and took the baby
away.”
“A boy, I heard. The cleaner gave the baby to someone from Chaozhou.
For 2000 yuan.”
“Oh yes, I know the girl. Her name is Liu Qin.
She’s from the Assembly Department. A Guizhou girl.”
“The boy is from Henan. From the Moulding Department. He left
three months ago.”
“She was too scared to go to hospital. So no abortion.”
The conversation continued . . .
Life goes on in the form of such suffocating details
Comprising struggle, anger, sadness, empathy, helplessness, pain.
Our era had a gigantic stomach, digesting Ah Qin, me, and the
unknowing baby born in the toilet.
(Zheng X. 2012: 155)

Gossip such as this seldom reaches the ears of labor sociologists, especially those from outside China. Also, individuals such as Ah Qin would normally be considered too “ordinary,” or not transgressive enough, to warrant the serious attention of policy makers wishing to govern the lives of the migrant labor force—they are neither sex workers nor labor activists threatening social stability. But having witnessed too many young women going down the same road as Ah Qin, Zheng is angry and full of anguish. The book is replete with stories of unplanned pregnancies, abortions gone wrong, babies born out of wedlock and given away, and trusting women betrayed by one’s boyfriend.

A third ethnographic implication of Zheng’s work is that the language

of poetry, like the musical and theatrical works that her poems have engendered, enables Zheng to give shape to prelinguistic, corporeal sensations and experiences in ways that conventional scholarly language cannot adequately deliver. In describing the bodily sensations experienced by migrant woman Xu Rong 旭蓉 she writes,

As I write down these lines, your pale face
reveals your fragility, dizziness, palpitations, your breathing labored
you've gradually got used to what the industrial age brings
diseases, pains, glues, benzene . . . all entangled in the veins.
(Zheng X. 2012: 114)

Finally, Zheng not only wants to give voice to those whose words are not heard but also wants to maintain the rage on behalf of those workers who are resigned to the reality of their lives and refuse to adopt the language of resistance. The first few poems in the book, however, do more than just narrate rural migrant women's stories. They are also about these individuals' fatalism and their lack of the capacity or willingness to make sense of their lives. These poems are laced with the poet's frustration with her own inability to do anything for these women to improve their situation, as well as her failure to share her anger with these workers. She records her own pain at having to maintain the rage alone.

Yan Rong 延容 is a coworker who had come to Shenzhen from rural Anhui six years ago. She and Zheng bonded during the time they worked together, and she told Zheng about having lost three months' wages because the factory she worked for had gone broke and the factory owner had fled; about having been conned by hustlers; and about having been robbed on the street. These unfortunate experiences, to Zheng's disbelief, did not make Yan Rong angry. Instead, Yan seemed to be accepting everything that life dished up for her and chose to forget the bad things. Further, she could not comprehend why Zheng insisted on remembering them. As she often said to Zheng, "Life is too hard as it is. Why bother dwelling on these things? You can't change them." Like many other women, she thought that Zheng was "weird" for writing "angry and sad poems," whereas Zheng believes that she simply cannot "turn a blind eye to injustice."

Subaltern Politics

Zheng is by far the most successful *dagong* poet, and she has published a number of collections in recent years through the conventional channels of book publishing. But these books are mostly bought by urban and educated readers in cultural institutions such as universities, the media, and those literary associations where there is an interest in the lives of migrant workers. Through translation and the resulting exposure in transnational artistic and literary circles, Zheng's work has also become increasingly available to middle-class readers and literary establishments outside China. The migrant women who feature in her stories and their peers are typically not readers of Zheng's work, nor of subaltern literature in general (Sun 2014). Zheng, and many other *dagong* poets like her, freely acknowledge that most workers would rather spend their free time playing games on their phones, watching a comedy, or browsing their social media feeds than reading poetry—particularly poetry that has pain and suffering as its central motif.

This urge to document suffering in poetry—the only weapon Zheng has at her disposal—is perhaps driven by a strong though somewhat inchoate conviction that it is historically important to write down what she witnesses, at a time when such matters are conspicuously absent from prevailing governmental discourses. Official news and mainstream culture are decidedly uninterested in the tribulations of China's rural migrant workers and even assiduously try to avoid recording it. Thus, even though she as an individual feels that she can do very little to change the world, she can at least document these sufferings as an eyewitness:

From time to time, I asked myself, “What is the point of writing these ineffectual words?” But I kept telling myself: I must write them down, along with my feelings. These feelings are not just mine. They are also the feelings of my coworkers in southern China. Indeed, we cannot change things in our lives, but I have witnessed [many things], and I can write down what I have witnessed! (Zheng X. 2012: 180)

In this sense, Zheng is not dissimilar to those artists making music or experimental videos and novelists creating fiction who, as Robert Stam (2015: 186) puts it, engage in “polyandrous flirtation” with the genre of documentary.

Furthermore, Zheng the poet goes beyond flirtation; she believes that her existence as a poet is only made possible through the use of documentary in the texture of poetry.

On the cover of the book, the publisher describes *Stories of Migrant Women Workers* as “the first symphony featuring migrant women workers, labor, and capital in the history of Chinese poetry.” But it is also an elegy, adagio in style, for the collective sacrifice of their youth that China’s migrant women have made. By contrast, in socialist China, labor was constructed as a productive activity that was associated with liberation from patriarchy and the freedom to pursue a new kind of personhood. When workers retired from a long career in a state-owned enterprise in the socialist era, at least they felt a collective pride in relation to their work and developed a shared sense of nostalgia (Lee 2007). In contrast, migrant women workers are constructed by capital and the state as “outside of and a hindrance to a reconstituted imaginary of modernity” (Rofel 1997: 96). It is in this sense that Zheng’s poems about these women, and especially about the bleak future they face, can be seen as politically transgressive.

But it has to be noted that Zheng is not explicitly critical of the party and the government. She was even uncomfortable discussing her work in the context of class conflict, insisting that her poetry, though mostly about the pain and suffering of women workers, is motivated by a sense of injustice and compassion rather than class consciousness (Sun 2014). Neither Zheng the narrator, nor the migrant women workers whose stories of pain and suffering she tells, wants to be identified as proletarian class subjects. Despite this, quite a few of her poems were deemed to be too critical of the party and government to be published in literary journals, and *Stories of Migrant Women Workers* would not have been published at all if not for the brave—if somewhat risky—decision of a senior editor, who published the book against the local government’s advice. While her work comes under official scrutiny from time to time, Zheng believes that she has been let off reasonably lightly, because poems, unlike novels, arouse much less public attention, and “in any case, if magazines don’t want to publish them, I can always put them online.” Although she has caused a few small “controversies” from time to time, none of these has ended up becoming a “big deal” (Zheng X., pers. comm., December 2019). In the meantime, Zheng con-

tinues to be on the provincial government's payroll as a literary editor. Her experience with censorship demonstrates the complexity and contingency that often mark the critical work that Chinese intellectuals attempt to carry out from within "the system."

Nevertheless, Zheng's narratives of migrant women challenge the position of Fulian (the All-China Women's Federation). In the eyes of the federation and its cadre, Ah Qin and Zhou Xiaozhi (discussed above) are hardly role models and therefore not worth writing about, as they come across either as too gullible and ignorant of how to protect themselves, or—worse than that—as lacking in self-respect and moral guidance, and perhaps in desperate need of education to improve their *suzhi* 素质 (personal quality) (Sun 2004). Alternatively, Fulian might judge them to be victims of their own romantic aspirations. Inundated by messages of romantic love, delivered in the form of images of sexuality in popular culture and via the internet, young rural migrants—away from the prying eyes of their parents and village kinship groups—are seen by the federation as embracing their newfound freedom to experiment with casual sex. But Zheng refuses to explain these women's decisions in these terms. She believes that the industrial regime, which relies on the mobility of its labor force, has created an unprecedented level of estrangement from family and kinship support, and consequently a profound loneliness for many of these individuals. Drawing on what she had witnessed, Zheng (pers. comm., 2016) sought to explain to me why some young migrant women decide to give themselves to men:

Just imagine this: you're seventeen or eighteen years old. You've never been to the city. You are now working on the assembly line and living in a dormitory with several strangers. Your boss scolds you all the time, you don't have friends or even acquaintances nearby, and you feel totally alone in this world. Nobody notices your loneliness, or feels your fear. You're nobody, invisible, like thousands of other people walking in and out of this factory every day. Then along comes this lad, a coworker. He pays attention to you; he offers to fetch your lunch from the canteen and then sits with you; he walks you to your dormitory in the dark, at the end of a long shift; he accompanies you to the clinic when you're sick with a fever. Because of him, you no longer feel lonely. Can you blame this

young woman for feeling grateful? If giving him what he wants is her only means of expressing her gratitude, can you blame her for deciding to do just that, especially if this moment of shared intimacy is something she wants as well?

Migrant men's sexuality has, in the eye of China's middle class, been mostly linked with moral depravity. While not condoning sexual crimes, Zheng (pers. comm., 2016) is sympathetic to men seeking sexual intimacy and is reluctant to criticize men who behave irresponsibly in intimate relationships:

Indeed, when such liaisons come to an end, it is the women that stand to suffer more. But I don't want to pass moral judgment on these men. How can they make promises of commitment, when their own existence is so mobile and transient, their own prospects so dim? Some of these men are hardly grown-ups themselves. They can barely support themselves, let alone shoulder the responsibility of a family. So, when they get a woman pregnant, they suddenly realize the mess they are in, and their natural instinct is to run away. It's not a noble decision, but it's understandable.

In other words, these migrant men's bad behavior and "commitment-phobia" can benefit from being understood in a wider context that features a deregulated sexual market, the sexual freedom that is available to young migrant men and women who are unmoored from traditional family and village networks, and migrant men's desire to assert their masculinity despite their emasculation in class terms. Although Zheng wants to document the invisible pain—both bodily and emotional—suffered by migrant women in their intimate relationships with men, she believes that to put the blame wholly on men runs the risk of privileging gender over class and of losing sight of the bigger culprit—state-sponsored transnational capital.

However, perhaps a more politically transgressive aspect of Zheng's stories is their refusal to end on a note of optimism. None of the one hundred stories of women in her book have happy endings. This is not because workers cannot imagine what the future will bring; it is because they know too well what lies ahead. As Zheng (2012: 247) writes in the epilogue of the book: "Where is their future? Walking on the main thoroughfare in the industrial complex, I see droves of young women workers in factory uni-

forms. They look so tired. Projecting into the future, I can already see them back at home in the north, withering away with old age.”

The future of these migrant women, as imagined by Zheng Xiaoqiong, is in stark contrast to the future as imagined by the state media (Sun 2019). There, migrant workers are told that “the future will be beautiful as long as there is love” and that love can grow when the couple have a common goal of owning property. The scenario of migrant women getting old and weary in the village home is antithetical to the domestic utopia that is conjured up in these official news stories. Instead of having both consumption and love in the city, the women in Zheng’s poems have neither. To Zheng, the saddest aspect of these women’s future imaginary is not that they will get old, nor is it that they will have to return to the countryside. It is that when they are old and look back, there is nothing worth remembering, and no retirement pension. Instead, plagued by the hidden injuries and diseases that have resulted from years of industrial labor, these migrant women workers and their contribution to the nation’s prosperity are forgotten, and the collective sense of pride and achievement in China’s modernization process, which they should feel entitled to share in, is denied them. This bleak prospect is foreshadowed in Zheng’s earlier poems, which ruminate on what lies ahead for these fresh-faced young women when they are “swallowed and digested by the gigantic and rapacious stomach of the industrial machine,” only to vanish into thin air when they are eventually spat out. As she wrote in *Jute Hill*, “The wind blows away everything, / the only thing to do now is get old and go home.” This bleak view of the future facing migrant women brings into sharp relief the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) that is often found in the state’s neoliberal narratives.

A few women in Zheng’s stories have found contentment by returning to the traditional role of wife and mother in the village—an outcome that may jar some feminist scholars. Shu Miao 舒苗, for instance, never complains. She thinks that work on the assembly line is not as hard as tilling the land. One gets paid each month on time, and there are always extra shifts to do, as long as orders keep coming in. Her only hope in life is to “find a good man. / After all, this is pivotal to a woman’s happiness” (Zheng X. 2012: 27).

In my numerous conversations with Zheng over several years, the question whether marriage and motherhood are the only viable outcome for

migrant women workers came up frequently. I put it to Zheng that scholars, especially those concerned with gender politics, may find her position conservative and reactionary. Zheng (pers. comm., 2016) thinks that that they may have such a reaction because “we’re looking at the same cohort of people from different perspectives”:

Unlike them, I *am* one of these rural migrant women, and their experiences are also my experiences. Scholars and researchers may have a research interest in this group of people. They come to study them and then reach a conclusion, but I have to ask what these migrant women realistically can do when they are in trouble, such as when they are abandoned by lovers, when they get injured at work or fall ill, or when families break down due to long-term separation. I ask what possible solutions are viable to them from *their own* point of view.

In other words, Zheng’s perspective is informed by what viable, realistic options are actually available to migrant men and women—not what their alternatives might be in an ideal world. This perspective has led her to be tolerant—some may even say sympathetic—to women going back to their traditional roles. As part of her research, Zheng visited a village in Hunan Province—a village known for sending out migrant women workers, many of whom end up working in the sex trade. In her fieldwork notes, Zheng observes that the women she has met fall into two broad categories: first, those who come back to the village, marry, have children, assume the “normal” roles of mother, daughter-in-law, and wife, and go on to live a more or less stable life; and second, those who do not or cannot have children, end up in divorce, and, when faced with the resulting moral pressures in the village, leave yet again and go back to prostitution. Zheng believes that procreation is a key task to undertake and that children are a crucial link in upholding the rural moral order. For this reason, she has a great deal of empathy for those women who have the misfortune of becoming sterile due to prostitution-related gynecological diseases or after repeated botched abortions. More than once in my conversations, she mentioned that she was very “heartened” to hear that some of these women had succeeded in having children through artificial insemination: “That is indeed a ray of hope for them. I’m so pleased that this is at least possible for some of them” (Zheng X., pers.

comm., 2016). This perspective, informed as it is by a down-to-earth and practical sense of rural migrant women's options, has also led Zheng to see some women's decision to resume the traditional role of wife and mother as a demonstration of their resilience rather than an active assertion of conservative and backward-looking social values.

Starting Dialogue, Building Connection

As Farquhar (2002: 6) points out, "one must always *claim* a reading: this is my interpretation, this is what I saw there." This is because, as she points out, reading is "tied to the particular site, the particular history and abilities of the concrete reader." As an academic researcher who has spent several years doing fieldwork on the experience of love and romance of rural migrants in southern China, I went into the field with certain research questions, analytic categories, and the academic language I have learned to speak in. Yet I have found the subaltern experience of intimacy as elusive as the language one can use to make sense of it.

Furthermore, I was acutely aware of the question of how to process the personal feelings and emotions—my own and those of my interviewees—that arose in the process of gathering and analyzing data, even though the very subject of my research was intimate feelings and emotions. On more than one occasion, my interviewees broke down in the middle of their conversations with me. Similarly, I also laughed and cried in their presence when they shared their stories—sometimes sad, sometimes funny. Yet, I have always struggled with how to document and acknowledge these emotions, and what empirical status I should give to the tears that flowed at these emotional, nonlinguistic moments.

These are the specific personal circumstances and specific professional context that have shaped the approach I have taken to Zheng Xiaoqiong's poems. From this reading, I have become convinced that subaltern writers such as Zheng are indeed the ethnographer's "wonderful partners." I believe, as wonderful partners often do, that good subaltern writers also serve as interlocutors, interveners, and critics. To me, Zheng's stories provide an alternative perspective on the practical circumstances, moral realities, and emotional consequences of the intimate experiences of China's rural

migrant women. Reading these narratives against the normative accounts that are promulgated in state feminist media, on the one hand, and transnational scholarly research, on the other, we are able to see the extent to which “subjects make meaning of their own experience, the degree to which subalterns both legitimate and subvert hegemonic categories” (Hershatter 1993: 106).

This reading also suggests that migrant subaltern literature can sometimes lend a helping hand to scholars who cannot get sufficiently close to their subjects, offering “richness, texture, and detail” that contribute to the “thickness” (Ortner 2006: 43) desired by ethnographers. It may well be for this reason that some labor sociologists (e.g., Pun and Lu 2010; Chan, Selden, and Pun 2017, 2020) have taken to citing poems written by migrant workers in their academic writings. Further, by resorting to narration and conjuring up dramatic scenes, the poet can get past the impasse that is often created by research subjects’ inability or unwillingness to speak. In other words, it is not so much that the poet is able to make migrant women speak while the ethnographer is not; rather, it is that poetry allows the poet to represent, with pathos, these women by directly focusing on what they do and how they act, thereby allowing herself to become a channel for their voice. Thus, she effectively serves as a “surrogate” ethnographer whose work benefits the scholar.

It is possible to make another observation from this reading, about ethnography as a genre. In the same way that Zheng’s poems are ethnographic, the ethnographies that are familiar to scholars are “genres as much as other literary forms” and are also socially constructed (Karp 1986: 132). In fact, as this discussion suggests, migrant subaltern literature not only adds thickness to scholarly knowledge but may also work to coauthor and at other times deauthorize scholarly ethnographic accounts that, despite their best intentions, often end up missing the contradiction and complexity of the experiences they seek to construct. In this sense, reading Zheng’s poems constitutes an important intellectual exercise. This is not so much because literary writers such as Zheng and artistic works inspired by her poems afford us a more authentic or truthful account of the intimate practices of rural migrant women than that offered by scholarly accounts. At this dis-

cussion makes clear, there are at least two reasons why such an intellectual exercise is worth pursuing. First, artistic forms such as poetry, music, and theater may be much more effective in capturing the “invisible, as well as nonlinguistic” experiences that may come “directly from the body of a subaltern” (Pun 2005: 167). Second, in representing the subaltern experience, these artistic creations may offer alternative positions in relation to the state and capital, and present interpretations of human action, desire, and agency that differ from—and even challenge—the analytic paradigms on gender, class, and social inequality familiar to scholars in social sciences. In other words, many such nonacademic works that explore similar human experience can be appropriated as effective interventions in academic discourses, in ways that may challenge, expand, and enrich our understanding of the lived experience of these individuals. The onus is on us as scholars to discover ethnographers’ “skilled partners” outside the academic sphere and explore analytically and methodologically productive ways of forging such partnership.

Finally, despite the rich sociological significance of Zheng’s poems, I do not want to advocate a return to scholarly inquiries that deprioritize literary aesthetics. Although my approach to Zheng’s poems is neither literary nor aesthetic, it is important to stress that the value of Zheng’s work does not lie solely in its capacity to serve as a repository of empirical knowledge about Chinese society. After all, it was the power of Zheng’s poetic language, imagery, and imagination that profoundly touched me in the first place. Without this initial encounter with her work as literary texts with exceptional aesthetic merits, my subsequent sustained and deep engagement with her work would not have been possible, worthwhile, or so rewarding.

Notes

- 1 Zheng’s works will generally be referred to here using the English translation of their titles.
- 2 I assisted Zheng in her correspondence with this composer, serving as her translator. Unless otherwise stated, all translations (including Zheng’s poems) in this article are my own.

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