Guest Editor's Introduction:
Cultures of Labor and the Labor of Culture

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This special issue originates from the workshop "Cultures of Labor, Inequalities, and Eviction: Migrant Worker Literature and Media Practices in Contemporary China" held at the University of Chicago Center in Beijing in June 2019. The workshop brought together scholars and activists to discuss the ways in which migrant workers cope with dislocation and precarity through cultural practices such as writing, music, theater, and use of the internet and social media. By "cultures of labor" we meant the expressive forms and meaning-making practices by and about those who are referred to or identify as "rural migrants" (*nongmingong* 农民工), "precarious laborers" (*dagongzhe* 打工者), or "new workers" (*xin gongren* 新工人): fluid, overlapping, and internally diverse categories characterized by conditions of subalternity largely due to exploitative labor relations and unfair distribution of rights rooted in the Chinese household registration system (*hukou* 户口) and

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exacerbated by global processes of capitalist accumulation. Our focus was on the cultural and media practices that help individuals gain dignity and recognition, create feelings of solidarity, and navigate precarious times. Consequently, we engaged terms such as "new workers" as sites of identification and empowerment rather than as sociological categories, while remaining mindful of the structural inequalities that attend to their formation (Chibber 2017).

The workshop feels distant now, after three years of the COVID-19 pandemic stopped most research travel to China without a clear sense of when it may resume. Nonetheless, as on-site fieldwork and in-person interactions were replaced by online communication of all kinds, out of it grew a rich set of investigations into ordinary workers' practices of storytelling. Collected in these pages, they document how ordinary people go about narrating their lives and the lives of their real and imagined neighbors through performance and poetry, oral fables, and social media posts. If people's acts of textual and visual storytelling and their use of media form the core of what we call the cultures of labor, our aim is to also better understand the labor of culture: the work that stories do and how these stories work. In so doing, this special issue foregrounds that storytelling itself is a form of labor, and as such equally subjected to the inequities, constraints, and expropriations that come with other types of labor.

In addition to articles by scholars based in South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States, this issue includes contributions by authors based in China: an article by Zhang Huiyu, a scholar devoted to the study and promotion of workers' literature, translated by Federico Picerni; a talk by scholar-activist Lü Tu, translated by Siting Jiang; a short story by Li Ruo, a writer affiliated with the Picun Literature Group, translated by Jiarui Sun; and an interview with activist Wang Dezhi, translated by Max Bohnenkamp.[1] These four authors are all connected with Migrant Workers Home (*Gongyou zhi jia* 工友之家; also "the Home" hereafter), one of China's best-known nongovernmental organizations on workers' rights, and one that aims to expand these rights through the promotion of culture. Amid the blossoming of labor NGOs in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Chan K., Qiu, and Zhu 2006; Chan C. 2013; Fu 2017; Howell 2019, 2021), the Home was founded in 2002 in Picun,

an "urban village" (*chengzhongcun* 城中村) on the eastern outskirts of Beijing, some eighteen kilometers south of Capital Airport. Five other contributions in this issue also discuss Picun.

With a local population of a little over one thousand and a migrant population estimated at thirty thousand in 2019, Picun is one of those "spaces of the in-between" (Chu et al. 2022) growing along the edges of China's large seaboard cities where millions of rural-to-urban migrant workers have found a temporary home. Around 2012, its territory of 3 square kilometers reportedly accommodated 205 workshops producing furniture, glass, ceramics, and metal items (Qian 2012), which over the past ten years have been mostly torn down to make space for high-tech businesses and new rental units that attract younger migrants employed in the service sectors. In 2018–19, Picun's bustling commercial street was enlarged and the facades of its tiny restaurants and cell phone stores plastered over. The iron archway that used to greet visitors at its entrance was replaced by a massive one made of concrete, while newly built apartment complexes were painted in bright colors that recall the Santa Marta favela in Rio de Janeiro. The walls lining the street to the Migrant Workers Home were rebuilt and coated dark grey, and students from Communication University of China were invited to repaint the iconic graffiti outside of the Home's courtyard (fig. 1). An online article reporting these changes in July 2019 describes Picun as "a microcosm of China's urbanization" and asks, "Will it become China's migrant workers' culture art village?"—possibly alluding to the prospects of a more socially minded version of art colonies such as that of Songzhuang ten kilometers to the southeast (Sohu 2019).

Where exactly Migrant Workers Home stands in relation to the contested urbanization and social stratification of China's peripheries and the roles of art and culture therein is not easily pinned down. Conversations with its members reveal that while seeking to advance workers' rights, the organization has constantly had to readjust its methods and its positioning vis-à-vis the local government and other funding agencies. Housed in the premises of a former tile factory occupying two facing courtyards across a side alley of the village, the Home has undertaken a range of projects over the years, from providing a legal advice hotline to workers supported by Oxfam Hong Kong (Hsu 2017: 154) to opening a school for migrant children and

Figure 1 Students painting the wall outside Migrant Workers Home, June 2019. Photograph by the author.

a museum devoted to migrant worker culture; from organizing a yearly New Year Migrant Workers' Gala, poetry recitals, and theatrical performances in their Workers' Theater to setting up the Picun Literature Group. In prepandemic times, one of its two courtyards served as the village's public square, with couples and groups of women dancing (fig. 2) while mothers with their babies crowded its secondhand clothing store. When the fire that killed nineteen migrants in Daxing, south of Beijing, unleashed another wave of evictions in late 2017, Migrant Workers Home served as an organizational node for volunteers bringing blankets and food and offering shelter to migrants who found themselves homeless overnight. Its own premises were largely spared then, even though they were threatened with eviction and there was a brief power cut.

There are three main reasons why texts by scholars, activists, and authors

Figure 2 Square dance at Migrant Workers Home, June 2019. Photograph by Jiahe Mei.

affiliated with the Home are included in this issue. First, while a wide range of academic writings have detailed the history, mission, and activities of the organization (Qiu and Wang 2012; Thelle 2013; Sun 2014; Huang 2016; Fu 2017; Hsu 2017; Jia 2017; Cliff and Wang 2018; Lian and Oliver 2018; Connery 2019; Florence 2019; van Crevel 2019; Picerni 2020; Yin 2020), our translated contributions offer insights into the new strategies for survival that the Home has adopted since the suppression of most labor-related NGOs in 2015, the introduction of the new Charity Law in 2016 and the Foreign NGOs Management Law in January 2017, and the evictions that hit the Beijing migrant worker population in late 2017 (Franceschini and Nesossi 2018; Schultz 2018; Lin 2018; Li, Song, and Zhang 2018; Howell 2021; Froissart and Franceschini 2022). The scope for labor activism has shrunk dramatically under Xi Jinping's rule, but whether this signifies the end of advocacy remains a matter of debate (Connery 2020; W. Wang and Snape 2021; Deane 2021). In China as in other parts of the world, "the room to maneuver may

be increasingly limited for more outspoken, claim-making NGOs, while it is expanding for service-oriented non-profits" (Holbig and Lang 2022: 576–77). Reflecting the prepandemic and early pandemic moment, the talk by Lü Tu and the interview with the Home's cofounder Wang Dezhi show how activists on the ground are adapting to the transformation of Beijing into a "world city" and the consequent "expulsion of undesirable populations" (Hayward and Jakimów 2022: 462; Friedman 2022: 32)—but also how widely Lü's and Wang's ideas diverge, even as they both target global capitalist hegemony as the primary cause of social inequalities in China and elsewhere. While insisting that "China's urbanization and industrialization can't be reversed; by the same token, the fact that the people who have built these cities want to remain in them can't be reversed, either," Wang admits that "our symbolic value and function are much greater than our actual significance" and speaks about his efforts to ensure the Home's economic survival by expanding its secondhand clothing stores on the model of European and US-based social enterprise. Meanwhile, having lived in Picun for nearly a decade and written three books on China's workers (Lü 2013, 2015, 2017), sociologist Lü Tu has moved to Pinggu, over seventy kilometers to the northeast, together with the Home's two other founding members and New Worker Band leaders Sun Heng and Xu Duo.[2] In Pinggu, they have an organic peach farm and training and recording facilities, and have mostly focused on local government-sponsored rural projects. "If I am against the current mode of urban development and industrialization, why would I go out of my way to help people assimilate into such a culture?" Lü Tu poignantly asks.

Second, whereas English-language scholarship on Chinese working-class culture has generally emphasized the impact of industrialization and urbanization in the more developed coastal areas, the personal accounts offered in these pages urge us to rethink the urban and the rural together. Li Ruo's story "Village Lunatics" interweaves with vivid detail the vicissitudes of individuals whose minds are scarred by old and new forms of discrimination. The story portrays the village as a transient place, quietly violent and bleak, where legends and rumors proliferate whenever someone leaves for the city or disappears. Nonetheless, far from invoking the rural merely as a "field of death" (Yan 2003: 579), Li Ruo's narrative imbues it with life and

seeks to elicit expanded forms of care toward "the ones who are forgotten, who live like wild grass."

Third and no less important, our translated contributions can further dialogue and collaboration, in a process that entails interlingual and cultural translation at every turn. Dialogue, collaboration, and translation are crucial to the invisible labor subtending the production of knowledge. We make them the visible cornerstone of our writing practice, in what is also a call to reconsider intersections of academic writing and activism—or, more precisely, to retrain ourselves to see the one within the other.

Another dialogue we wish to advance is that between different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, especially on how they relate to individual and collective acts of storytelling. Disciplinary frameworks shape our objects of study and the questions we ask. Of course, no discipline is airtight, but it may not be too simplistic to say that literary scholars tend to look for evocative language and imagination to deepen our understanding of texts and authors, anthropologists for individual experiences that illuminate the lives of groups and collectivities, and historians of labor for the formation of working-class consciousness and action. By contrast, in this special issue anthropologists and media scholars rethink the value of storytelling and poetic composition in their subjects' lives and treat stories and poems as ethnographic materials, while literary scholars adopt ethnographic approaches and pay close attention to the social dynamics in which texts emerge.

Thus, the authors collectively offer new ways to rethink two old problems that are broadly related to the labor of culture. The first is how to apprehend the entangled relation between experience and representation in the becoming-visible of subaltern groups, and how to account for intricate processes of self-individuation that the "pernicious binary between representation and reality" (Franceschini and Sorace 2022: 22) tends to obscure. The second is the tension between individual acts of writing and the collectivities, media, and institutions that make this writing possible but also confine it: the social spaces and publics that constrain writing but might simultaneously be transformed by it in new and unexpected ways. Although the contributions to this issue diverge in focus and approach, a common premise is that storytelling is crucial to people's ongoing efforts to confront the

inequalities shaping their lives. What we strive to document are the many ways in which individuals make sense of, cope with, and contest structural inequalities—and the role of literature, media, and performing arts therein.

What is at stake when people speak of their own experience as singular or plural, what circumstances affect their decisions to emphasize individual or communal aspects, and what political implications might such narrative acts have? Can different forms of storytelling help change social relations, redress skewed divisions of labor, and "abolish any presupposed inequalities of intelligence" (Rockhill 2004: 2)? As Chun Chun Ting and Mun Young Cho's articles show, and Li Ruo's story poetically illustrates, these questions are especially urgent in a China dominated by the discourse of *suzhi* 素质, the "human quality" that supposedly divides the population into those more and less fit to socially advance. Finally, which practices of reading and listening are necessary for such changes to occur? Guided by these questions, this special issue invites a rethinking of what "cultures of labor" are and what "the labor of culture" can do today.

Legacies and Paradoxes

Migrant Workers Home's strategy of cultural mobilization, which Diana Fu (2017) calls "pedagogy of discursive action," recalls the Chinese Communist Party's own use of cultural resources at the beginning of the revolution, though on a much smaller scale (Perry 2012). Some of the practices described in this issue may remind readers of the study groups and the amateur arts of the Mao era: not only the writings of the Picun Literature Group that emerged thanks to the organizational efforts of the Home (see Zhang's, Ting's, and van Crevel's articles) but also the theatrical experiments of Daizō Sakurai discussed by Justyna Jaguścik. Nonetheless, the "new worker literature" of today (*xin gongren wenxue* 新工人文学 is the term that most members of the Picun Literature Group prefer over other denominations) is neither tied to party-led campaigns nor devoted to extolling industrial production as it was in the Mao era (Pozzana 2019). New worker writing can constitute refuge from toil and pain rather than an extension of the productive process as it supposedly was in the age of top-down collectivization. And yet, a similar valorization of the amateur or untrained artist is in evi-

dence, based on the notion that the migrant workers' firsthand experience allows their writing to better resonate with ordinary readers. Also similar is the critique aimed at professional authors and artists, seen as ensconced in the ivory tower and obsequious to the demands of the market, entangled in state bureaucracies and complicit with capitalist distribution networks, and essentially out of touch with what people feel and want.

All this is not without its paradoxes. Students and journalists are key participants in the project of the Home, which enjoys a robust presence not only on social media platforms but also in mainstream venues such as the *China Daily*. As Zhang Huiyu's article illustrates, all kinds of cultural "experts"—literary critics, authors, foreign-based and China-based academics (including faculty from the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China)—regularly give lectures at the meetings of the Picun Literature Group. Visiting Picun can thus sometimes feel like entering a hall of mirrors that reflects the researcher's own desire for equality and social justice. The Migrant Workers Home is, in this sense, paradigmatic. It crystallizes the dynamics that often shape knowledge production about China, forcing us to confront our own position as agents who remain fully implicated in the production of what supposedly constitutes our object of study.

At the same time, several of the Picun writers do hope to be recognized primarily *as writers*, not confined by any identity marker or prefix, and to reexpand images of literary authorship so as to reopen it to those without a college degree. Some of them claim affinities with earlier modernist and avant-garde authors, supported in this by literary critics who simultaneously stress the authenticity of their voice. Thus, the struggle for visibility of the present-day worker-writer seems at times to reaffirm conventional distinctions between the elevated and the low, the literary and the commercial, the truthful and the fanciful, rather than questioning evaluative criteria for inclusion in the literary field. Meanwhile, the members of the New Worker Band (discussed in Yurou Zhong's article) reclaim their right to experiment with different kinds of music irrespective of the social connotations attached to each style, suggesting that no style is inherently elitist or popular and all the world's music repertoire is at their fingertips.

Nonetheless, as several of the articles remind us, searching for individual

recognition and reclaiming the right to stylistic eclecticism do not imply a betrayal of class solidarity but rather challenge us to rethink the very relation between aesthetic expression, social experience, and political action, between the restoration of individual dignity and collective advocacy. Neither of these relations, van Crevel argues, needs to be thought of as a zero-sum game. That a worker takes time to write poetry, play music, and perform on a stage ought then to be seen as a different kind of political action that needs to be considered on its own terms, in an environment in which direct political action is increasingly constrained (Florence 2019: 181). The worker's act of writing, in this perspective, entails a critique of the "distribution of roles between the language of the people and literary language, reality and fiction, document and argument" (Rancière 2012: x), and of the social hierarchies that predetermine who is entitled to the poetic imagination. Their very act of writing urges us to question the nature of the act of reading and the associated evaluative criteria: What makes a poem good? Why does a story matter? Whom or what are we looking for when we read Chinese literature today?

Sharing Space

Several of the articles in this issue engage the idea of a "shared space" (*gongxiang kongjian* 共享空间, *fenxiang kongjian* 分享空间, or *gongyong kongjian* 公用空间), a concept that Dai Jinhua (1999) first introduced in her *Invisible Writing: Studies on Chinese Culture in the 1990s*. Dai's argument was that dichotomies of official (*guanfang* 官方) and unofficial (*minjian* 民间), mainstream (*zhuliu* 主流) and marginal (*bianyuan* 边缘), Chinese socialism and Western/global capitalism were inadequate to capture the entanglements and mutual borrowings characterizing contemporary Chinese culture. Noting that the New Independent Documentary Movement and the commercially successful CCTV program *Oriental Space* (*Dongfang shikong* 东方时空) overlapped in terms of subject matter, format, and producers even as they seemingly occupied opposite positions in the cultural field, Dai (1999: 28) proposed that "to describe and sketch the contours of the 1990s cultural map, it is less effective to use Cold War-ish modes of thinking and paradigms such as official/unofficial, which seem self-evident but in fact remain

vague, than to come to terms with a *Chinese-style cultural shared space, an incessant process of bartering over power and reshuffling it*" (emphasis added).

Dai theorized "shared space" in response to concepts of "public space" (*gonggong kongjian* 公共空间) and "public sphere" (*gonggong lingyu* 公共领域) that were widely debated in the 1990s, which in her view and that of many China scholars presupposed too neat an opposition of state and society (or state and market) to capture Chinese realities. Nearly twenty years later, Dai revisited this idea when she cocurated the 2018 exhibition *The Lonely Spirit* (the Chinese title of which was *Xiangxiang—Zhuliu jiazhi* 想象–主流价值 [*Imagination—Mainstream Values*]), a thirty-year retrospective held at the Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum proposing that phenomena generally considered marginal, independent, or subversive might in fact refract aspects of Chinese "mainstream culture." In this context, the notion of "shared space" was brought up to advance three propositions: First, there is no consensus on what the "mainstream" is in contemporary China. Second, any form of power works only insofar as it is supported by some degree of consensus. And third, marginal spaces are likely to converge toward an ever-morphing mainstream:

> When I look at the cultural reality of China since the 1990s, the spaces that we often consider to be oppositional, marginal, and seemingly incompatible with power, may instead become the breeding ground for a new power to be exercised and a new mainstream to be established. This movement from the margins to the center has continued without interruption over the last twenty, thirty years. Each construction of the so-called new margins may mean that a new mainstream is about to take hold of our reality, of our cultural or historical space (Dai, Su, and Wei 2018).

Informed by the discipline of cultural studies, Dai's claims likely drew on Dick Hebdige's ([1979] 1999: 448) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*—specifically, his arguments on a "shared ideological ground" between youth subcultures and dominant culture in the postwar United Kingdom, and on how emerging subcultures would eventually enter the mainstream in an endless circle of cultural subversion and cooptation. What remains inspiring in Dai's formulation is her emphasis on process, which in turn resonates with recent efforts to reconsider the problem of public space and public sphere by

eschewing normative definitions and rather seeing "publicness" as a "contested, interactive social process that gives rise to an alternative aggregation of views and sentiments among its multiple agents" (Veg and Cheng 2021: 321).[3]

Dai's concept of shared space allows us to engage cultural formations that evade definitions of "grassroots" or "*minjian*" because they lack the autonomy associated with these terms (Veg 2019). Entailing negotiation, friction, and resistance, "shared" might in some cases better be rendered as "sharing"—as a precarious, conflictual, at times violent, and always unpredictable process of occupying contested physical, social, and virtual spaces. Focusing on the process of sharing means to account for its unequal conditions, especially when the space that an organization such as Migrant Workers Home occupies is a borrowed space, with conditions largely dictated by local and national governments that have the power to close it down. Readapting this concept today, we are aware that not everything is allowed to exist in a shared condition and not everything countercultural will enter mainstream practice. Political mobilization is quickly suppressed in today's China, and spaces that are overtly resistant are shut down. Migrant Workers Home has had to tread carefully as it tests the boundaries of visibility in the "incessant process of bartering over power and reshuffling it" necessary to survive. Dai's concept acquires new relevance precisely because the space for political advocacy has shrunk.

Notably, in Dai's recent elaborations, "shared space" does not solely refer to the dynamics linking marginal and mainstream cultural formations. In the 2018 conversation quoted earlier, Dai expands the concept to interrogate other kinds of boundaries that are also relevant to this special issue. The first concerns the place of art: "Can art still do something, should it do something, or if art is just a form of expression and representation, is there some shared space between art and reality, a possibility for mutual intervention?" (Dai, Su, and Wei 2018) Second, Dai calls attention to the labor that sustains illusions of individualism and intellectual autonomy. Intellectual elites, she contends, feel autonomous from mainstream values because they conduct their existence in the isolation of their homes, an isolation that is sustained by the labor of the less privileged who are vulnerable to all kinds of perils. Dai presciently called attention to inequalities that have become painfully

pronounced with the COVID-19 lockdowns when she asked, "The delivery riders, the global logistics system, the people who constantly expose themselves to the outside world so that we may lock ourselves up at home—do we have any relationship with them, and if so, what kind?" Paradoxically, Dai continues, we are most subjected to hegemonic values—she says we are "locked up in the center of the system"—when we feel most independent from them. Although one of Dai's premises is that the mainstream is an elusive, fragmented formation, what emerges from her discussion is that at its core lies the fiction of individualism, which both sustains and is sustained by structures of inequality. Her concept of shared/sharing space aims to counter this fiction, as she urges readers "to participate in the creation of a different sort of mainstream values so that we might still orient ourselves as a community, in a social sense" (Dai, Su, and Wei 2018).

The contributions included in this special issue take the notion of shared space in different directions for disparate contexts, genres, and media. Yurou Zhong's article emphasizes the uncertainties facing the members of the New Worker Band as they expand their "Earth Folk" tour through China's villages and towns. By listening in to the eclectic sounds of the band's 2019 album and tracing its stylistic and political negotiations, Zhong teases out what musical experimentation means for this group—as a source of livelihood, a means for collective self-identification, and a tool to rethink the possibilities of art and activism within the unfinished project of a new culture of labor. Maghiel van Crevel and Chun Chun Ting's articles, as well as Zhang Huiyu's translated article, focus on the writings of the Picun Literature Group. For van Crevel, "shared space" denotes the very conditions of possibility of what he calls "battler poetry" (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌) and the opportunities for boundary-crossing that it brings its authors and readers linguistically and socially, on the page and in real life. By studying the writings of Xiao Hai, a "poster boy for a poster village" affiliated with Migrant Workers Home, and analyzing the circumstances and media environment that have allowed him to become a published poet, the article illuminates how "battler poetry" works, inviting readers to reconsider the relation between creativity and censorship and between aesthetic value and social advancement, and to question ingrained assumptions of what poetry should be. Chun Chun Ting's article examines different versions of stories by writers affiliated with the Picun Lit-

erature Group to argue that their textual transformations over time reflect the impact of its collective reading and writing practices. In response to the critique that the desire for individual recognition hampers the political potential of migrant worker literature and to scholars who have emphasized its limited readership (Sun 2014), Ting turns to the effects that this writing has not on readers but on its authors, stressing that "literary writing constitutes an emancipatory act for the working-class subject who is a writer." The "shared space" of the Group—merging literary experimentation with socialist worker culture, local socialist legacies with global leftist activism—facilitates social identification and generates a sense of empowerment among its authors. Such identification and empowerment are reflected in the painstaking revising of their works, which may lay the groundwork for future processes of political empowerment. Zhang Huiyu's article situates the Group's writing in dialogue with the socialist and modernist strains of Chinese contemporary literary history, adapting the notion of "shared space" to investigate the stylistic borrowings and heterogeneous voices that compound "new worker literature."

In Justyna Jaguścik's analysis of the trans-Asian connections of the Tent theater collective led by Daizō Sakurai and the performance of the play *Crow²Topia* in Picun in 2010, "shared space" refers to at least four interconnected aspects. First, the psychic energy generated by the grueling exercises of self-exploration demanded of all participants—nonprofessional actors and people from all walks of life who join in the writing and in the performance. Second, the physical space of the tent itself, a provisional shelter that is separate from, yet porous to, the urban space outside. Third, the "temporary alliances" between workers, activists, academics, local governments, and audiences that make the Tent theater performances possible in the PRC. And fourth, an inter-Asian leftist cultural sphere which came into being as Sakurai's theater, originally based in Tokyo, traveled to Taipei, Seoul, Shanghai, and Beijing.

What People Actually Do to Survive

"What viable, realistic options are actually available to migrant men and women?" This is a question raised by Wanning Sun in her article and addressed by several other contributors to this issue. Mun Young Cho com-

plements the focus on resistance and class formation that has characterized much of the debate on precarity and online labor in China (Qiu 2009, 2018; Smith and Pun 2018), by investigating what a precarious woman worker "actually does in order to survive."[4] Combining Mario Tronti's (2019) notion of the "social factory" with insights drawn from social reproduction theory, Cho's article offers three interrelated arguments. First, in conditions of precarious employment, no single workplace defines the worker's relationship with her work, as each work experience acquires a different valence when contrasted to a previous one. Second, in a situation where "paid and unpaid forms of labor are increasingly inseparable under the conditions of late capitalism," labor alienation is not confined to the factory floor but rather extends to "wherever social relations are capitalized," including the familial and private spheres. Third, in contrast to scholars who emphasize the disconnect between workers' online and offline lives (X. Wang 2016), Cho's juxtaposition of the worker's fragmented labor trajectory with her "WeChat diary" foregrounds their intersections, showing how they are both finalized to the material and affective production of value. Overall, what emerges from Cho's article is a reassessment of the "fluid boundaries of labor," and of the ways the perception of one's "human quality" (*suzhi*) intimately constrains the worker's self-representation and her whole labor trajectory.

Prompted by the difficulties that conventional scholarship encounters in getting close to the emotional aspects of subaltern experiences, Wanning Sun's article focuses on *Stories of Migrant Women Workers* (2012) by the poet Zheng Xiaoqiong, a collection of one hundred poems in which Zheng depicts individual women she met among her fellow migrant workers in Guangdong, inside the factory workshop and elsewhere. Sun's ethnographic approach to poetry is inspired by Judith Farquhar's call for a kind of "methodological creativity," which involves "uniting an anthropology of the body and an anthropology of discourses and practices" (Farquhar 2002: 5) and which partly relies on the work of literary authors, whom Farquhar considers "wonderful anthropological partners" (24). By reading poetry as a source of empirical knowledge, Wanning Sun's intervention aims to "identify a possible shared space in which a productive partnership between academic and subaltern writers can be forged." In Sun's reading, poetry, ethnography, and politics redefine each other. Zheng's poetry, Sun points

out, complicates the optimistic assessments of the consequences of mobility for migrant women found in the scholarly literature (Gaetano 2004). What instead emerges from the testimonies Zheng collects is appalling violence and pain. The poet's own approach to her interviewees is to remain mindful of what these women "realistically can do when they are in trouble"—and to "ask what possible solutions are viable to them from *their own* point of view."

It is in this call to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016: 1) that we can identify not just Zheng's own poetics and politics but also those animating our special issue as a whole. For Haraway, staying with the trouble, which entails "learning to be truly present . . . as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings," constitutes the only viable response to the climate emergency, in contrast both to the faith in technofixes that will miraculously rescue our futures and to the cynical view that it is too late to fix anything. Only one of our contributions explicitly engages climate emergency (Lü Tu), but all of us try to stay with the trouble in the sense of renouncing both utopianism and cynicism, acknowledging the limitations of our categories, and remain "entwined" even when the way forward is unclear. Yang Zhan's article brings us back to the stories circulating in Picun and in other urban villages—specifically, the "fables" that migrant workers tell one another in quotidian and informal settings. Differently from ethnographic accounts written by scholars and by migrants-turned-writers, the fables that circulate orally among migrants have little representational value in the sense that they are rarely rooted in real facts. Nonetheless, Zhan contends, these "narratives of hyper-uncertainty" are important because they allow migrants to make sense of precarious economic conditions, to keep hopeful when facing displacement, and to construct group identities and moral worlds. Adapting David Graeber's (2012) concept of "interpretive labor," Zhan argues that these acts of storytelling ought to be considered as a form of hidden "epistemic labor" that burdens the disadvantaged and that is essential to maintaining a positive relationship with the future, in situations where optimism is hard to sustain. Acknowledging the hidden labor of storytelling, in Zhan's view, expands our understanding of migrant agency in China beyond concepts of

resistance and "suspension" (Xiang 2021). These stories make urban villages livable, thus constituting a form of everyday politics that has rarely been acknowledged in the scholarly literature to date.

Restarting from Zero

Since 2020, China's zero-COVID policy and the concomitant expansion of the platform economy have led to ever more precarious working conditions under a regime of constant surveillance. Algorithmic control of task allocations and capillary monitoring of workers' physical mobility—in China as elsewhere, but ambitiously so in China—is altering the workers' relationship with other workers, with the city, and with work itself (China Labor Bulletin 2022; Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020; O'Donnell 2022). By restricting access to the cities and the movement therein, the government's response to COVID-19 has intensified processes of work regimentation and expulsions that were already under way (Hayward and Jakimów 2022; Friedman 2022).

In June 2022 we learned through WeChat that the Migrant Workers Museum still stands—but the Home's volunteers' lodgings, the canteen, and the room that hosted the Picun Literature Group had been torn down. Two strict lockdowns since the beginning of the pandemic prompted them to move most of their literature workshops and the sale of secondhand clothes online. The school they established for migrant worker children closed in 2020, but it still offers after-school programs and now boasts a new library where the Picun Literature Group occasionally meets in person. The Home also operates a public canteen. The New Workers Theater was turned into a department store for goods to be sold at low prices. Sales have moved to the school, but some of the merchandise is still in the theater, which momentarily serves as storage space.

Many workers have left Picun, and Beijingers have less money to spend—even the sale of the organic peaches from Pinggu has slowed down. The Home has been offering all kinds of community services, from distributing surgical masks to collecting money for sick workers in need. Overall, Wang Dezhi emphasizes, Picun has become a more beautiful place. Meanwhile,

he is still busy with plans to expand their chain of secondhand clothing stores with the support of transnational corporations including Microsoft and Starbucks. Such are the uneasily shared spaces of contemporary China and the conditions in which today's cultures of labor can hope to endure.

Notes

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1 On the notion of *scholar activism*, see Yan, Ku, and Xu 2021; and Day and Schneider 2018.

2 On the many names of the band over the years, see Yurou Zhong's article in this issue.

3 See also Farquhar 2009, which argues that public space is where the political is redefined by ordinary people's everyday actions.

4 On the limits of representing precarity in Chinese visual culture, see Hillenbrand 2019.

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