

## Literature as Medium:

### The Development and Cultural Space of New Worker Literature

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#### Introduction

On April 25, 2017, domestic worker Fan Yusu 范雨素 published her memoir “Wo shi Fan Yusu” 我是范雨素 (“I am Fan Yusu”) on the WeChat blog of the *Jiemian-Zhengwu* 界面-正午 news outlet. It quickly became one of the most widely read pieces on the internet, reaching three to four million readers in just a few days. As a result, the mainstream media’s attention was caught by the Picun Literature Group, based outside Beijing’s Fifth Ring Road. The Group is made up of rural-urban migrant workers with a fondness for literature who meet with volunteers from the city on weekends to share their writing and discuss literature. Fan Yusu originated from this amateur literary community.<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, the documentary *Wo de shipian* 我的诗篇 (*Iron Moon*) portrayed the living and writing conditions of six worker poets. Production was underway when one, Xu Lizhi 许立志, committed suicide by jumping off a building. This dramatically exposed the striking contrast between his extraordinary poetic talent and the misery of his life.

Modern Chinese literature, a new medium and form of writing generated during the New Culture Movement, played a key role in twentieth-century China's modern and revolutionary culture. Like Frederic Jameson's (1986) discussion of the function of third-world literature, New Literature in China carried the dual role of providing cultural enlightenment while also serving the cause of national salvation. It was not until the country transitioned to total marketization in the late 1980s and early 1990s that modern literature lost its ability to interact with history and society, becoming a form of elite culture marginalized by mass and consumer culture. New worker literature, represented by Fan Yusu and Xu Lizhi, is a form of self-writing that reappropriates literature as medium, making visible an otherwise invisible labor force and turning an inaccessible social experience into popular culture. The concrete dynamics of this reappropriation often lead to an interaction among several agents beyond the authors themselves, as will become clearer later in this essay. Ultimately, one can say that the "incursion" of new worker literature into mainstream culture by means of the internet and documentary filmmaking was much more a product of a "sneak attack" launched by the new worker authors than it was a target of mainstream interest.

### Literature as Medium: The Development of New Worker Literature

The Reform and Opening Up policies in the 1980s turned China into the "sweatshop of the world," causing a vast segment of the rural labor force to move to eastern cities and southern coastal areas, ushering in the history of precarious migrant labor. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2018), there were 280 million rural-urban migrant workers in China in 2018. This enormous group constitutes the mainstay of China's manufacturing industry as well as the vast majority of low-end service jobs in areas such as food service, domestic service, and security, but despite its large numbers, until recently it has been voiceless and anonymous in mainstream culture.

Since the 1990s, there have been a number of different labels for workers' literature: migrant worker literature (*dagong wenxue* 打工文学), subaltern literature (*diceng wenxue* 底层文学), grassroots literature (*caogen wenxue* 草根文学), and new worker literature (*xin gongren wenxue* 新工人文学). These terms reveal different understandings of what constitutes workers' literature. My approach is to consider any literary work by worker authors, as well as works with an industrial subject, as part of this category.

Before 1949, workers were the oppressed members of society and the literature they produced was rudimentary. There are records of progressive intellectuals from large cities, such as Shanghai, who went among workers to train them in writing (Feng 2019). After the founding of the PRC, with the working class at the helm of the country, the state gave considerable support to worker writers and to "worker-peasant-soldier" literature (Xie 2015). Literary creativity was also promoted by mass art campaigns at the grassroots, with poetry and reportage as the main genres. After 1978, industrial themes and worker authors were discarded as too politicized.

In 1984, *Tequ wenxue* 特区文学 (*Special Economic Zone Literature*), edited by the Shenzhen Writers' Association, published a number of works on the lives of migrant workers. In 1985, the young critic Yang Honghai 杨宏海 first used the expression *dagong literature* in asking: "What is '*dagong* literature'?" The term *dagong* originated in Cantonese [and is generally translated as "working for the boss"—Trans.]. *Dagong* literature comprises literary works of all genres—fiction, poetry, reportage, essays, visual and theatrical works—that reflect the life of the *dagong* worker as a specific social group" (Yang 2007a).<sup>2</sup> Using the word *dagong* to describe migrant workers, on the one hand, is closely connected to the fact that Guangdong and Shenzhen, which were the frontlines of economic reform due to their proximity to Hong Kong, have been popular destinations for labor migration since Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 1992 Southern Tour. On the other hand, the word *dagong*, with its implicit sense of precariousness and brevity, clearly denotes the condition of the rural-urban migrant working for a private company or a foreign-owned enterprise, an employment system completely different from that of state-owned enterprises (SOE) in the planned economy.

*Dagong* literature began to attract widespread attention between the late 1980s and early 1990s as it became the most significant literary phenomenon

in Guangdong thanks to the publication of “Wo shi dagongzai” 我是打工仔 (“I Am a Migrant Worker”), a short story by Zhang Weimin 张伟民, in Shenzhen’s major literary journal *Dapengwan* 大鹏湾 (*Dapeng Bay*), and to the unexpected commercial success of *Qingchun yizhan: Shenzhen dagongmei xieshi* 青春驿站—深圳打工妹写实 (*Station Youth: The Real Life of a Female Migrant Worker in Shenzhen*) by Anzi 安子 shortly thereafter. One of the most noteworthy characteristics of this category of fiction is the clarity of its creative subject as it represents a form of writing produced by migrant workers themselves who directly address the nonsocialist framework of *dagong* labor conditions.

As for style, *dagong* literature is predominantly characterized by realism. Three main topics can be found in *dagong* literature: a complex urban imagination; a conflict of identity based on simultaneously being outsiders, urbanites, and marginalized; and contradictions between migrant workers and their bosses (Yang 2000: 16–18). In recent years, *dagong* literature has become a symbol of urban culture actively promoted by the local governments of Shenzhen, Dongguan, and other cities in the area. Several *dagong* authors have also become professional writers (Yang 2007b).

If the naming of *dagong* literature finds its justification in the occupational identity of its authors, subaltern (*diceng*) literature since the early 2000s refers to the migrant workers’ position at the low end of the global industry chain, which makes them politically, economically, and socially subaltern. A number of works portraying the life of the underclass have appeared, starting with Cao Zhenglu’s 曹征路 *Na’er* 那儿 (*There*). While *dagong* literature is the product of authors who are themselves *dagong*, “the role of subaltern literary narration is to tell the [subalterns’] stories and give them voices” (Li 2014a: 52). Far from the tradition of twentieth-century revolutionary literature, subaltern literature is much closer to the neorealism of the 1990s in its postrevolutionary humanist narratives and depiction of a cruel, helpless, and desperate subaltern world dominated by the law of the jungle (Li 2014b; 2018).

The mass media usually uses the term “grassroots literature” to indicate authors with a subaltern background, such as Yu Xiuhua 余秀华. As opposed to the markedly collective and political imagination present in the concepts of *dagong* and subaltern literatures, what is prominent in grassroots

literature is the authors' nonpolitical identity as ordinary individuals. As far as the mainstream media is concerned, the transition from *dagong* to writer is of much more interest than literary style per se. Literature in this case is seen as merely a tool in the transition from grassroots to professional, with literary institutions and journals typical of a socialist state playing a key role.

Recently, another term has come up—*new worker literature*. The expression “new worker” has been used by a group of scholars and practitioners, such as Bu Wei 卜卫, Lü Tu 吕途, Sun Heng 孙恒, and Wang Dezhi 王德志, who research and provide community service to migrant workers. In their opinion, terms like *worker-peasant*, *dagong*, *subaltern*, and *grassroots* reveal the discriminatory gaze of the city. *New workers*, on the other hand, better capsulizes the uniqueness and subjectivity of migrant workers in the city.<sup>3</sup>

*New workers* carries an array of implications. First, *worker* not only denotes an occupation but also a political subject in China's revolutionary practice during the twentieth century in the socialist state. The working class constitutes the sovereign people. Second, the rise of the working class to state power coincided with a change in the semantic value of terms like labor, work, and production, whose negative connotations were replaced by positive social recognition. Third, *new* creates a contrast with “old” workers. A fundamental difference lies in their relation to industrial labor. The old workers were seen as being like Lei Feng, screws in the collectively owned socialist industry, whereas the new workers are screws that have “fallen to the ground” in private or foreign-owned companies, to borrow from Xu Lizhi's signature poem. Fourth, new workers also include low-end urban laborers in the tertiary sector or service industry, like domestic workers and delivery people. Fifth, the emphasis on the identity of “workers” has the additional function of placing new worker literature in the larger context of the twentieth century, since the appropriation of the right to culture by workers has been a key issue in China since the beginning of the modern age.

On this basis and for the following reasons, I advocate for using *new worker literature* to describe the literary output by migrant workers: the authors are new workers themselves, or at least people who have had some experience as new workers; the term imparts a sort of self-awakening of workers' identity and critical reflections on modern industrial civilization;

and it demands greater equality and fairness. In this sense, it is not only a kind of writing by a specific social group but also a form of literary expression that fully represents such a group and responds to contemporary crises.

Literary creation is the preeminent phenomenon within new workers' culture. If we locate the inception of *dagong* literature in the early 1990s, then the general pattern of new worker literature has been part and parcel of China's thirty-odd-year history of labor migration, without interruption or discontinuity. This has been the case for three reasons: First, unlike theater, film, and other visual arts that require more expertise, training, teamwork, and financial support, writing costs very little. This is particularly true for poetry, which comprises most workers' literature, since it is shorter, conveys individual emotions more directly, and is more accessible because workers can only write in their limited free time. Second, many migrant workers have received a basic education. Large-scale anti-illiteracy campaigns have been carried out by the PRC since its founding, together with other education initiatives, like night classes and technical training courses. This has made it possible for Chinese workers to acquire a relatively high level of literary competence.<sup>4</sup> Third, during the Mao era, literature was the most popular cultural medium. From interviews with worker authors of that period, we know that they received literary journals and books even in remote rural areas, and this laid the foundations for the vast scale of today's reading public. Fourth, the internet has provided a space where these subaltern groups can read and exchange literature. Several worker authors have their own blogs, QQ accounts, and Weibo accounts, which has been fundamental for the circulation of their writing.

### Creating New Worker Culture in the "Forest of Others"

The last forty years have seen momentous changes for workers. While the old workers lost the welfare protections they enjoyed under the *danwei* (work unit) system, the new workers have found themselves living under unprecedented employment conditions. Low wages keep them from fulfilling their dream of settling down in the city and many are separated from their families. They are the invisible denizens of the city, like the construction workers behind the green cloth covers of construction sites.

The monotonous labor on the assembly line has kept industrial and urban production from holding any positive value for them. Their own identity is a cause of shame, well expressed by new worker poet Tang Yihong 唐以洪 (2016: 53), who describes his twenty-year-old gray work uniform as “the gray of tearstains and sweat-stains / glue odor, machine oil odor, the odor of grievances.” The sense of strangeness and nonbelonging experienced while working in the city is captured in the verses of Guo Fulai 郭福来 (2015: 140), another new worker poet: “Child, don’t stay too close to me / we are both like / lonely trees / living in a forest of others / my leaves will block / the sunshine and the rain meant for you.” The poem, addressed to a left-behind child, strongly conveys the emotions of the new workers in the city. For them, metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai are not only unchartered waters but also a “forest of others”—a space where they do not belong and cannot achieve self-realization.

Undoubtedly, these authors are only a minority of all the talented individuals among the vast mass of ordinary laborers. Migrant workers live in an impasse between “a city where one cannot stay and a countryside where one can no longer return” (Lü 2015b). For the vast majority of worker authors, then, writing is primarily an individual enterprise. In recent years, however, some nonprofit organizations have appeared in some cities to provide cultural services for migrant workers. Thanks to the support of social and institutional actors, these groups have opened free libraries, cinemas, theaters, and other cultural spaces in urban villages where new workers tend to concentrate.

In May 2002, a group of young migrant workers with a fondness for the arts, Sun Heng, Wang Dezhi, Xu Duo 许多, and Jiang Guoliang 姜国良, established the Migrant Workers and Youth Art Troupe (*Dagong qingnian yishutuan* 打工青年艺术团; see Yurou Zhong’s essay in this special issue). Two years later, they founded the Migrant Workers Home to provide a variety of free cultural activities for migrants. They finally settled in Picun in northeast Beijing in 2005. Allowing workers to speak is the Home’s *raison d’être*.

The Migrant Workers Home is a cultural “tent” pitched in the “forest of others.” (This “tent” refers to the tent theater that performed in Picun in 2010. See Justyna Jaguścik’s essay in this special issue.) For over a decade,

the Migrant Workers Home has turned a slice of urban space acquired on a temporary lease into a constellation of cultural activities. The Picun Literature Group was formed in September 2014 at the request of some workers interested in writing and reading, who then spent their Sunday evenings listening to lectures and discussing literature. For laborers moving between the city and the country, it is a literary harbor. Lectures are given by teachers from universities, high schools, and research institutions, as well as professional writers and artists. With the training they provide and the readings they suggest, these agents have become an active part in the production of new worker literature. Readings suggested by the lecturers have been extremely diverse, ranging from classical to modern Chinese literature. They include classics from European literature as well, such as Kafka, but also famous contemporary worker authors like Xu Lizhi and Zheng Xiaoqiong. Although authors are the final creators of new worker literature, lecturers' mediation inevitably influences its aesthetic directions and references.

I was a cultural volunteer from the city. From 2014 to 2015, I gave many of these lectures. When I went abroad in 2015, the lectures were given by other volunteers, and I resumed in 2016. Together, we read some of the classics, shared our views on social issues, and at the same time, I encouraged the participants to write their own stories and share them with the rest of the Group. Unlike conventional education, classes in the Literature Group do not have a fixed program or teaching materials and depend heavily on each teachers' expertise. The space where the meetings are held is also completely different from a traditional classroom: it is more like a meeting room in which participants and teaching volunteers sit together around a table. During my lectures, we would spend half the time discussing works of literature. One aspect that everyone particularly appreciated was that each participant would read one passage aloud. In addition to helping familiarize the class with the work under study, this method made workers feel more like active participants in the process. Reading aloud turns writing into sound and creates a sense of theatrical performance. This method originated in the mass education movements carried out in different stages of China's modern revolutionary history, when reading groups made up of illiterate or almost illiterate workers and peasants would read aloud to promote self-education. Another part of my lectures consisted of discussing the participants' own



works. I would choose some pieces from the homework they had submitted and ask the authors to read them aloud; then we would analyze the strong and weak points. Both criticism and praise were taken as encouragement, making them feel not merely like learners but actual authors capable of producing literature. At the same time, this method allowed for collective discussion and mutual acknowledgment. Thanks to this “literature class,” the workers found a way to express the emotions generated by their work experience and their ideas about major social issues. In general, I refrained from intruding in their discussions, even when they became heated. These vigorous discussions proved that the Literature Group belonged to workers themselves; I was only the organizer and moderator.

The Literature Group was not only an opportunity for the workers to write and a boost to their self-confidence, it was also part of the process of their cultural empowerment and is the reason many workers choose to live or work in or near Picun. It is a kind of public cultural center—there, workers can borrow books, watch or participate in a variety of cultural activities, find daily necessities at cheap prices, and socialize. Compared to the oppressive space of the factory and the isolated space of the home, workers can feel valorized as subjects there. A group that spontaneously comes together like this can definitely stir the creativity of the laborers. Some members, like Fan Yusu, Li Ruo 李若, and Ji Tong 寂桐, had no prior writing experience. They became aware of literature as a useful instrument for conveying their emotions by participating in the Group’s regular exchanges. “I am Fan Yusu” is essentially the story of an ordinary female laborer’s encounter with books and literature, as evidenced by its opening lines: “My life is like a book that is too hard to read, so clumsily has fate bound me” (Fan 2017). Fan’s personal relation with literature is a relevant part of her story (Picerni 2020). Throughout the countless vicissitudes of work that she endured, literature, both ancient and modern Chinese, and also Western, became her pastime and mental nourishment. From this perspective, literature maintained its purest function—that of providing spiritual enjoyment for common readers.

Ji Tong is the pen name of another Group member. After joining the Group, Ji wrote many poems full of pathos, thirsting for an impossible love in the dire conditions of her life. Read “Xiangban” 相伴 (“Keeping Company”), for example:

No sky can be forever cloudless / black clouds haze / are its uninvited guests / but the sun is always hanging down / the night sky is not always beautiful, yet / the stars the moon / always stand by it / then try to think of yourself from another angle / look! see! / your figure is far away already / only the luggage of when I came / and my most profound memory of you keep me company. (Ji 2015: 19)

Here, the sun, moon, and stars symbolize her desire for lifelong companionship. Take also “Shi-yu” 石·雨 (“Stone, Rain”): “The encounter of stone and rain / will inevitably splash up the traces of blood / wake up, stone, / from your long sleep” (23). The metaphor of the “traces of blood” expresses the corporal and psychological wounds of love, its piercing of the bones with an intensity comparable to water slowly penetrating a stone. Ji Tong eventually left Beijing to return home over the Lunar New Year of 2017, which interrupted her writing activity.

Li Ruo is another migrant woman who started writing after joining the Literature Group. Much of her prose was published in the nonfiction column of the popular NetEase website, attracting a large number of readers. She also returned home for family reasons in fall 2017, which had a drastic impact on her output. In an interview she said, “Since I left Picun, no one has spoken to me” (Li 2018). We can infer from this that the space for discussion and self-education provided by the Literature Group not only enables workers to find the self-confidence necessary to start writing but also facilitates their self-awareness in appropriating literature as an expressive form.

In sum, the cultural space represented by the Literature Group is an effort to reconfigure the new workers’ cultural communities in China. During the Mao era, workers’ clubs, reading groups, and other mass cultural activities of various forms were integral components of the *danwei* space. Following the Reform and Opening Up and the transition from *danwei* to *shequ* 社区 (community, neighborhood), the communities of SOE workers dispersed, and the incoming migrant labor force found itself in a state of precarity and marginalization. It is in this context that community service organizations like the Migrant Workers Home strive to reestablish cultural communities and encourage the growth of a new workers’ culture centered on laborers’ subjectivity.

**“Make Our Voices Heard” through Literature**

Whether a vulnerable group like new workers has the ability to speak and to represent itself raises a classical Marxist proposition. Marx ([1852] 2008: 124) argued that peasants in post-Restoration France could not represent themselves, and that they must be represented, a position that raised other questions, such as who could represent them. The same questions resurfaced in the work of postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” she ponders the risks of representing the subaltern (Spivak 1988). When this discussion is applied to workers’ literature, two more questions arise: Can workers speak through literature, a bourgeois cultural medium, and can workers create their own class-specific form of literature?

Neither of these questions has easy answers. As mentioned earlier, workers’ literature has taken shape in two different configurations. The first appeared during the Mao era, when worker authors were trained by professional writers and editors and could count on support from the socialist state (Xie 2015), but at the same time the workers could not avoid being turned into professional writers who lost touch with the social reality they purported to represent.

The second configuration was the Reform-era new worker literature, peculiar in its use of modern forms of literature in its endeavor to express the voice of the workers and convey their subjective consciousness. It was, therefore, a postrevolutionary workers’ literature, and that was exactly where its political potential lay. This has to do with the emergence of experimental poetry and fiction in the 1980s. Workers’ poetry in the 1990s, for example, was influenced by the avant-garde poetry of the previous decade, as was clear from the individualistic, abstract modernist language it employed. However, unlike avant-garde poetry, new worker poetry abandoned the abstract subject for the concrete worker, no longer writing political lyricism eulogizing industrial production but conjuring up the modernist subject of an atomized worker alienated from the assembly line. One may say that, just as new workers live in “the forest of others,” so new worker literature borrows from “the language of others.” Actually, these different strains of literature do not stand in stark opposition to each other but exist in a cultural “shared space” where, according to Dai Jinhua (2018: 36), “Extremely divergent but occasionally convergent interests appear engaged in fierce conflicts as much

as in a seamless relation of collaboration.” Next, I will investigate how the “language of others” is used to express the new workers’ cultural experience.

When Xu Lizhi (mentioned above) killed himself in 2014, his case attracted media attention. In the short span of three to four years, this young poet had produced a vast amount of poetry—one way to temporarily evade the alienation of the assembly line. What stands out in Xu’s poetry are not only the ordeals suffered by the workers in the world’s sweatshop but also the author’s personal sense of loneliness and the despair generated by his repetitive, oppressive job (van Crevel 2019). In one poem, he shows the militarization of the assembly line (Xu 2016: 196):

Along the line stands / Xia Qiu / Zhang Zifeng / Xiao Peng / Li Xiaoding /  
Tang Xiumeng / Lei Lanjiao / Xu Lizhi / Zhu Zhengwu / Pan Xia / Ran  
Xuemei / these workers who can’t tell night from day / wearing / anti-  
static clothes / antistatic hats / antistatic shoes / antistatic gloves / antistatic  
bracelets / all at the ready / silently awaiting their orders / when the bell  
rings / they’re sent back to the Qin.<sup>5</sup>

This intrusion of history into lyrical imagery is uncommon in new worker poetry. Imagining workers as Qin Shi Huang’s warriors projects the power of a historical subject onto them. Always ready for battle, these terracotta warriors buried deep in the earth seem to be waiting for the call of a powerful motherland (or its new sovereigns).

In 2017, Xiao Hai 小海, a member of the Picun Literature Group, sent his first collection of poems, *Gongchang de haojiao* 工厂的嚎叫 (*Howl of the Factory*), to be published. The title is a direct reference to *Howl*, the signature poem of the American post-modernist author Allen Ginsberg. Xiao Hai started working in the Pearl River Delta in his teens and later moved to the Yangtze River Delta, then finally to the North and Beijing. To Xiao Hai, writing is vital. He portrays himself as having “one foot planted in the factory / one hand holding up the sun,” and poetry is what allows him to chase after his “lively dreams” (Xiao Hai 2017: 80). It emerges as an alternative space to the factory and to a drifting life of precarious jobs. He chose Xiao Hai as his pen name in a tribute to Haizi 海子. He is also an enthusiastic fan of rock music with John Lennon, Bob Dylan, and Pink Floyd among his favorites. Thanks to the opportunities of the digital age, these poets and

musicians left a deep imprint on Xiao Hai's production. His major contribution to literature lies precisely in drawing from the possibilities offered by this modernist culture to represent the life of a worker. While young industrial workers clearly constitute the subject of his poetic creations, Xiao Hai enriches his poetry by referring to the romantic, epic language typical of Haizi and employing the endlessly wandering and worn-out migrants as his lyrical subjects.

The following verses by Xiao Hai are emblematic:

Let me sleep a good sleep on a night in this warm and splendid era /  
besprinkled with the rose sunset on the left caressing the shadows of dusk  
on the right / let me sleep a good sleep with the fragrance from the depths  
of the earth / listen the breeze softly blows the ears it's the seeds of spring  
bursting with life under the Pacific.

The postscript reads: "June 1, 2014, a thought from the unbearable weariness of body and mind tossing around on the hotbeds of the workshops of every city" (99). It is only in poetry that the self can achieve its own realization, with "one foot planted in the factory" and "one hand holding up the sun," able to hear the life luxuriant under the Pacific.

The *I* is not the only subject in Xiao Hai's poetry. The *We* is also there. Let us examine how this plural subject appears in "Zaomeng shidai 2" 造梦时代<sub>2</sub> ("Dream-Making Era 2"):

When, exhausted, you leave the workshop and all you see once again is  
the always invisible night / you realize that you've probably been cheated  
the sun gets off before you / when, gritting your teeth, you resolve to carry  
on you tell yourself that tomorrow you'll see another color / but as one day  
you'll walk in this beautiful city you'll finally realize that the glimmering  
from the skyscrapers is only the magnificent reflection of neon lights / we  
carry the glory shed on us five thousand years ago a glory still beating on  
the soul's iron bones / we embrace the humiliation suffered a hundred  
years ago although we are also bipeds walking on a road. (119)

While the individual "you" in this poem is unable to see beyond the present (the distortions caused by neon lights), the collective "we" identifies with the glories and sorrows of the Chinese people as a whole historical subject

(the five-thousand-year history of China's civilization, but also the century-old humiliation). In Xiao Hai's poetry, this collective subject is usually associated with intense words like "era," "earth," "motherland," and "China." Through the transformation of "you" into "we," individual fate escapes its mundane existence and intersects with history, "We cannot remain silent even if our hearts are not suffering anymore / we must look at the eyes in front of us we must listen to the sounds in the distance."

In "Zhongguo gongren" 中国工人 ("Chinese Workers"), Xiao Hai makes use of Haizi's vast historical and spatial imagination to elaborate a new worker epic. In the opening lines of the poem, "I am a Chinese worker / we have companions in the revolution throughout the world," we find a trope typical of Chinese political lyricism in the Mao era—"our friends are everywhere under the sky" (*women de pengyou bian tianxia* 我们的朋友遍天下). Now, however, it is not revolutionary comrades who can be found "in every corner of the world" but products made by Chinese workers, since "all we can do is make the mysterious signs that say *Made in China* flow across the four oceans and seven continents into every river and the middle of every city's streets." The poet therefore wants to "send a letter across the Pacific to those golden-haired, blue-eyed yuppies / a letter that cannot be delivered."<sup>6</sup> "Yuppies" here refer to the consumers of the *Made in China* products, those who benefit from the supply chain where China is the producer and the United States is the consumer. This letter beyond time and space is not a complaint against "yuppies" but rather a statement:

There grow the Chinese workers piled up like stones in the Great Wall /  
there grow the Chinese workers all over the mountains and plains / there  
grow the Chinese workers wielding bronze / there grow the Chinese  
workers swallowing clouds and blowing out fog / there grow the Chinese  
workers in their clanging armor / there grow the Chinese workers silent  
like a riddle. (42)

The poem suggests that Chinese workers, whose material life is bound to the factory, can be reincarnated into heroes in clanging armor—empowered and subjectivized workers.

Although poetry is the main genre in new worker literature, fiction is not absent. Hailing from Shandong Province, Yuan Wei 苑伟 is another mem-

ber of the Picun Literature Group. He works as a carpenter at a furniture factory. Yuan has not produced many pieces, and he has written mainly about people and things encountered throughout his migrant life. Influenced by modernist fiction, his narrative style is characterized by constant tension and psychological overtones. His short story “Cengjing shuiguo de difang” 曾经睡过的地方 (“The Place Where I Used to Sleep”), which tells the story of a migrant worker on his way to the city, is reminiscent of Yu Hua’s 余华 “Shibasui chumen yuanxing” 十八岁出门远行 (“On the Road at Eighteen”), a story we read during one of our meetings to highlight some traits of modernism. However, in contrast to Yu Hua’s abstract, symbolized depiction of the main character’s adventures on the road, Yuan Wei, like Xiao Hai, aimed modern literature toward an earthier subject—the worker. A young peasant moving to the city for work, his protagonist has a concrete social identity. The excitement and anguish of his journey away from home are described in concise, lively language. The characters are squeezed into the back of a truck to be smuggled into the city; they are exposed to the cold outside and feel uncertain about the future. To avoid inspection, the truck accelerates wildly at every checkpoint, and “the tarp went from making a clattering sound to a prolonged squeaking sound. The wind would blow through, and I felt as if I were drifting naked in the sky” (Yuan 2017a: 95).

This hair-raising adventure foreshadows the miserable life awaiting him as a migrant worker. He writes that in the back of the truck “we would squeeze even closer, because that was the only way to protect ourselves from the cold wind and keep warm.” Yuan Wei’s “journey out” is representative of the stories of millions of migrant workers who have entered the cities since the late 1980s, stories in which the body is a trope for their suffering from the hunger and cold of this era.

Yuan Wei’s writing also exhibits a certain degree of spontaneous working-class consciousness, another trait only seldom found in new worker literature. “Lu” 路 (“Road”) is his story of a man and his cousin who, after completing their three-year apprenticeship as carpenters, want to start their own business. It can be considered a *bildungsroman*, a story of wasted youth. The two characters buy a couple of secondhand motorcycles and go on the road, where they encounter all sorts of problems and are plunged into feelings of despair, disappointment, and renewed hope, until they finally realize they

have no choice but to give up their petty-entrepreneur dreams and accept their fate as migrant workers (Yuan 2019). In another short story, “Shi de qi fan” 适得其反 (“Unexpected Outcome”), a conflict erupts between the I-narrator who wants to sleep early and a neighbor who makes money from live internet broadcasts (Yuan 2017b). In this space reminiscent of the “pavilion room” (*tingzijian* 亭子间) apartments often seen in 1930s Shanghai left-wing cinema, two migrant workers, one engaged in manual labor and the other in the internet industry, live next to each other, no different from what really happens in society.

Ma Dayong 马大勇, a man from Guangxi in his forties who is also a member of the Picun Literature Group, likes writing stories in the style of old vernacular fiction. “Xuetinghu” 雪亭狐 (“Snow Pavilion Fox”) is inspired by the eighteenth-century classic *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异 (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*). Set in a snow-covered landscape, it tells of a young manservant at a stage station and a fox spirit going to the city for work. The traditional “scholar-beauty genre” (*caizi guiren* 才子佳人) of traditional fiction is readapted here into a fantasy tale of a common soldier and a female migrant worker. The story’s language strongly reflects the old vernacular, and the characters’ descriptions are borrowed from traditional literature, as in this scene:

Only her face was visible, charming and delicate, her two eyes serene and deep, and her jaw sharp. An incomparable beauty. Her head was covered by a blue flower print scarf, unable to hide the long hair falling to her waist. Her body was bound in a coat of dense, fine white fur; a white skirt adorned her legs, and she wore a pair of tight black leather boots. Headscarf, hair, and shoulders were covered by a thin layer of snowflakes. She carried a bag of rice on her right shoulder, and a small oilpaper package in her hand. The wind that came howling made her headscarf and hair fly. Despite the garment and boots, she was bent over, shivering from the cold, her feet trembling. Her long shadow, blue and lonely, dragged along over the snow. (Ma 2019: 38)

This is the description of an ancient beauty, which attracts the young attendant’s adoring gaze. But he is powerless in the face of Snow Pavilion



Fox's fate and cannot oppose his master's decision to slaughter the fox spirits. This story brings us back to the outset of modern literature, and specifically to Lu Xun's *Gushi xinbian* 故事新编 (*Old Tales Retold*).

In sum, from this analysis, certain traits of new worker literature can be identified. First, the writing reflects the real life of migrant workers and represents their own emotional response to it. This migrant worker life is rarely seen in mainstream literature, and even when it does appear, it is mediated through the eyes of urbanites. New worker literature has a sense of subjectivity, demonstrated, for instance, by the accuracy of the representation of the alienation of the Foxconn workers in Xu Lizhi's poetry. Second, the new worker authors are better equipped to face the social issues that directly affect them, such as the left-behind children, wives, and elders. For the worker authors, writing individual stories means writing the story of the entire social group and seeing others in themselves through common issues such as family separation, nostalgia, and the longing for family warmth. Third, their language and literary style are directly related to and a continuation of the tradition of the 1980s (here is where other actors' participation also plays a role in shaping the new worker literature's basic traits). The borrowing from the "language of others" is an appropriation of, a creative use of, and a dialogue with mainstream culture.

## Conclusion

Literature has always been a part of societal transformations. As a medium, it not only describes contemporary life or represents the state of individual subjectivity but also provides a platform for public discussion. It is fitting that new workers should use literature to represent their lives and their value and expose another side of industrial production and urban space. New worker literature deserves its rightful place as an organic part of China's contemporary cultural experience.

Looking back on twentieth-century Chinese history, we can see that there was no lack of ordinary laborers engaged in literary creation. Worker writing is fully inserted in the history of twentieth-century China. What comes out of laborers who dedicate their free time to artistic activities while

living at the bottom of society and spending the entire year frantically trying to earn a living is a form of writing born of extreme conditions. For such busy lives, however, it is also a respite. Having gone through the enormous social revolutions and transitions of the last century, twenty-first-century new worker literature, far from highlighting hardships or trying to appeal through tragedy, is permeated with the dignity of the laborers and human sentiment, as opposed to the class hatred we find in revolutionary literature.

To conclude, allow me to return to “I am Fan Yusu.” The misfortunes of several people in Fan Yusu’s life find their way into this piece of nonfiction: her brother’s shattered literary dreams, her sister’s death, her husband’s violence. However, never does Fan Yusu utter any complaint for the hardship and bitterness of her life: she faces it with a plain, calm voice. She recounts how her mother, who was the head of the local chapter of the Women’s Federation, offered shelter to families who came from outside the village. However, after entering the city, Fan Yusu herself was often the object of contempt and abuse from the urbanites. She nevertheless continued to pass love and dignity on to those who were weaker. Even her daughters, with no formal education, carried on this spirit of empathy. This kind of compassion is not the pity of the strong for the weak but a feeling of mutual respect and love between human beings on equal footing—the emotional foundation of our era’s new worker literature.

## Notes

- 1 Having been a “cultural volunteer” myself, most of the empirical data on the life of the Group comes from my direct involvement with them.
- 2 All translations are by the translator, except when otherwise stated.
- 3 On the definition of new workers, see Lü 2013, 2015a, 2017.
- 4 According to government sources, “Figures from 1949 to 1988 show that a total of 163.55 million people were taken out of illiteracy, bringing the illiteracy rate among the population from 80 percent in 1949 down to 20 percent today” (People’s Republic 1988: 1).
- 5 Translation slightly modified.
- 6 The translation is by Maghiel van Crevel and appears, in part, in this special issue.

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