

Village Songs and the Building of Community Culture: A Talk

Lü Tu

Translated from Mandarin, edited, and annotated by Siting Jiang

Introductory Note

This is a talk given by Lü Tu 吕途 for the “Honest Food” (“Chengshi jiangzuo” 诚食讲座) online lecture series sponsored by the People’s Food Sovereignty Network in China (Renmin shiwu zhuquan 人民食物主权) in September 2019, introducing the “Village Song Project.”¹ Lü Tu is a social activist and sociologist based in Pinggu, a village northeast of Beijing, and her work focuses on the culture and rights of urban migrant workers, community building in the countryside, and environmental protection. A former associate professor at China Agricultural University with a PhD in developmental sociology, Lü Tu started working full time at the Migrant Workers Home in Picun, a Beijing urban village, in 2008. From 2009 to 2018, Lü investigated the living conditions of urban migrant workers and

provided services for them. During this period, she taught at and then served as the director of the Workers University (Gongren daxue 工人大学), a free educational program organized by the Migrant Workers Home with courses designed specifically for workers. Lü has also published three ethnographies on new workers. In 2017, seeing the decline in the countryside and the aggravation of the global ecological crisis, Lü's focus began to shift to rural development and environmental protection. Besides the Village Song Project introduced in this talk, she also participates in programs of the China New Rural Planning and Design Institute (Zhongguo xiangjian yuan 中国乡建院) and the "Earth Folk" ("Dadi minyao" 大地民谣) tour of the New Worker Band, discussed in Yurou Zhong's article in this issue.

The Village Song Project was initiated by Lü Tu and Sun Heng, extending Lü's long-standing interest in the everyday lives and cultures of the urban subaltern communities to rural communities. Although several experiments with popular art forms were undertaken in rural areas over the past century and the Chinese government's 2005 proposal for the Construction of the New Socialist Countryside as a national strategy has contributed to a surge of rural projects in the past decade or so, the Village Song Project holds a special place. Its focus on music as a creative medium for community building sets it apart from many other contemporary rural reconstruction projects that focus on the rural economy, planning, and education; its reliance on the villagers as the creative subjects of art distinguishes it from the enlightenment bent of many of its twentieth-century precursors. Moreover, the ecological awareness underlying the project places it within the larger global movement of environmental protection. By drawing together community culture building, collective art making, and environmentalism, the Village Song Project provides alternative modes of thinking about rural development.

In this talk, Lü Tu introduces the reasons she started the project, the process of songwriting, and her opinions on broader issues such as the role of local officials, the legacies of collectivism, and the villagers' subjectivity. In addition to shedding light on recent developments as well as problems in China's rural revitalization, Lü's discussion, below, gives us a micro picture of the work of "scholar activists" (Yan, Ku, and Xu 2020) in China today and urges us to think about questions of history, critique, and resistance in more localized and nuanced ways.

Is Writing a Book Useful?

Sun Heng and I have written three village songs this year. But before I discuss the creation process, I want to talk about the origins of the Village Song Project and why I decided to do it. Before this project, I worked for ten years as an activist for the new workers in China, focusing on problems related to their cultural lives. I wrote three books on this topic: *China's New Workers: Lost and Rising Up* (Lü 2013), *China's New Workers: Culture and Destiny* (Lü 2015), and *China's New Workers: Biographies of Women Workers* (Lü 2017).

I started working with the migrant worker community in 2003, and in 2008 joined the Migrant Workers Home in Picun, where my colleagues and I lived in cramped rooms of only a few square meters without a bathroom, shower, or kitchen. This got me thinking: migrant workers are so busy with their jobs and have almost no time to rest—how do they truly feel about living under such terrible conditions? Inspired by this question, I started investigating their living conditions more systematically.

“What’s your plan if you can’t find a job in the city?” was one of my research questions, and the most frequent answer was, “I’ll just go back to my hometown.” If I followed up by asking, “What’s your plan for the future?” many would respond, “I want to stay and work in the city.” These two questions may seem similar, but they are actually very different. Based on these responses, you can see that for migrant workers, staying in the city is the priority and going back to the countryside is only a backup plan. But can they really go back whenever they want? I did a lot of work on poverty alleviation in the countryside, and I know that the countryside is in serious decline now because of the massive migration into cities. With this in mind, after interviewing hundreds of migrant workers based in Dongguan, Shenzhen, and Picun, as well as visiting some of the workers’ hometowns in the rural areas of Chongqing and Zunyi, I finished the draft of *Chinese New Workers: Lost and Rising Up*. The book’s conclusion is that migrant workers are caught between the city, where they cannot stay, and the countryside, where they cannot return.

This is a pretty grim conclusion. But even if we know this, so what? In the past decade, many people have said to me, “So what?,” which made me see that while we need to understand the reality, it is more important to fig-

ure out how to deal with it. I felt like I needed to talk more with the workers to find some direction.

I made some astonishing discoveries during these discussions. After my first book was published, I organized a reading group among workers in Suzhou. About twenty people attended. My original goal was to talk with everyone about how we should confront the serious problems the migrant worker community was facing, but during the discussion, the workers confessed that they did not think their reality was so unfair. “But think about the living and working conditions that you described to me,” I said. “Are they really fair?” They responded, “They might be unfair, but they also kind of make sense.” I pulled some of their quotes from the book and asked, “Look at what you said here—does this really make sense?” And they said, “Well, maybe not, but it’s normal.” By the end, the discussion had basically turned into me debating with the workers, using their own stories against them.

The fact that so few people agreed with me was a huge shock. It made me realize that even though the workers and I were facing the same reality, our understanding of it was completely different. If the gap between reality and workers’ perception of it did not change, the fate of workers and our society would not change. The lesson I learned was that in order to change our society and reality, we must first change our way of thinking. This motivated me to work on my next book, *Chinese New Workers: Culture and Fate*.

I carried out many surveys and interviews while writing this book. One of the questions I posed to the workers was, “If you don’t like working on the assembly line, what would be some other options?” Most people replied that they’d like to start a small business and be their own boss. Here’s a paradox: if the workers believe that they can only change their fate by not being workers and becoming entrepreneurs, how does that count as a change in the workers’ fate? In light of paradoxes like this, the goal of my second book was to show, through the workers’ own stories, how cultural hegemony seeps into our beings through work, daily routine, and entertainment, and how we submit to it, consciously and unconsciously. Of course, I’m not saying that we don’t resist at all, but in most cases, we only resist when our suffering becomes unbearable. Usually, we just ignore it or take it out on others instead of fighting back.

After my second book came out, I had to face the same kind of difficulty again—although I was so eager to discuss the book with the migrant workers, few of them read it. They had no time or inclination to read. That was when I started to seriously doubt the value of my work. Of course, there were some encouraging moments, but usually the workers and I disagreed. There were some issues that so deeply divided us that our conversations just deadlocked every time I raised them. For example, when talking about what we should do, whenever I bring up the idea of collectivism, they would immediately veto it because to them the word basically meant bureaucratism. Similarly, whenever I mentioned the accomplishments of the collectivist era in China, they objected that back then, all individual freedom was suppressed. Fights over ideas and concepts like these usually led nowhere. How can we discuss future directions and strategies more productively? Can we approach the history of our country in a more nuanced way and give credit to the accomplishments of the past while acknowledging the lessons and mistakes?

I am not saying that theories and concepts are not useful; it's just that I believe that living history offers more concrete guidance and inspiration. Stories and historical processes that are alive and complex can reveal the grey areas and help us to stop seeing only in black and white. This was why I decided to write the biographies of some female workers. The book includes the life stories of forty-three women workers, each born in a different historical period after 1949. I chose the subjects in this way so that when all the stories are put together, a panoramic view of our history emerges. The structure of this book is like a symphony of individual histories and social history, and I hope this kind of design will give the readers a better way to contemplate our present and future.

So, the three books were written with distinct objectives. The first was written so that workers could see reality more clearly; the second so that we could understand ourselves more clearly; and the last so that we could learn from our individual and national histories. However, there were simply too few workers who had access or the willingness to read these books, and it made me wonder if writing books was really an effective way of addressing my concerns. Looking for alternatives, I started the Village Song Project, hoping that an interpersonal method would be more effective.

No Environment, No Future

Part of the basis for the Village Song Project is the seriousness and urgency of the environmental crisis and food safety problems right now. In 2009, when we started the Workers University in rural Pinggu, I was living in Picun. I commuted to Pinggu and stayed over for a few days when I had to teach. Once, I saw a vendor selling fresh-looking vegetables in front of the campus gate and bought some cucumbers. That night, I ended up getting food poisoning; my head felt like it was going to explode, but because it was the middle of the night and I didn't know where to get help, I ended up pumping my own stomach, which was horrifying!

The countryside is no longer as lush and green as we imagine. After the massive spraying of herbicides, it looks hellish. Chirping birds and fragrant flowers are already things of the past, and bees are almost extinct due to insecticides. Crops and plants might look pleasantly green, but during harvest, the fields smell only of pesticide. My body is sensitive to pesticide, and I can no longer eat uncooked vegetables. What's worse is that when I eat in a restaurant, most of the time, I end up vomiting.

The reality is alarming. Beginning last year, I've been reading books on the current environmental crisis; I've also translated excerpts from an article written by a scientist participating in the "Extinction Rebellion" movement in the United Kingdom that warns that soon there will be no ice in the Arctic, which will lead to disastrous global climate change. Global warming has really passed the turning point.

All these crises have made me wonder what the goal of my work should be. What we are doing in the city—serving the workers—is certainly meaningful and important. We still have so many people working in prisonlike factories, and there are still so many things to do. But, 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? These are, of course, my personal opinions, and I'm only willing to do things that I can truly identify with because I want to work with passion. Urban residents are eating poisoned food while slaving away to pay their mortgages; some will never be able to afford an apartment—what's good about this way of living? And due to this kind of lifestyle, we are poisoning our soil—what on earth

are we doing? If we don't change immediately, it'll be too late. Or maybe it's already too late. Either way, I believe that we must do the things we think are right as long as we are alive!

Now, some people will say, "So you want to work in the countryside? Fine. But why village songs?" Indeed, why village songs?

Aims of the Village Song Project

The reason I chose to work on the Village Song Project was because it's something that Sun Heng and I are really motivated to do. I've been discussing this project with Sun Heng over the past year, which has been a transitional time for the Migrant Workers Home. Sun Heng is one of the founding members of the organization, and he's been working there since it opened in 2002. His work includes a lot of logistical matters, like taking care of invoices and writing progress reports. It's not that he's unwilling to do those tasks, but I had the feeling that he wasn't entirely happy. Last year [2018] was especially hard for him. He thinks of singing for the people as his vocation, but the job has left him with almost no time to write songs. I hope working on village songs is something that finally speaks to his true passion.

I'm not a singer, and I've had no professional training in music, but I have helped translate the song lyrics in the albums released by our organization into English. After watching some of New Worker Band's live performances, I became drawn to the music, to the point where I wrote two demos myself; one is called "My Life Is a Book." This is a song written for myself as well as all the female workers whose biographies I wrote. If eyes are the window of the heart, songs must be the sound of it. Every human being's life is a song, and the earth is also singing. Unfortunately, most of us turn a deaf ear to the songs of the earth, cheerful and sad ones alike. Right now, the earth is sending us a lot of strong warnings, and I hope we can learn to listen to her voice.

The project also constitutes part of a broader transition in our organization. The Migrant Workers Home is turning seventeen this year and has been undergoing a lot of changes. We started experimenting with the model of social enterprise in 2006, and most of our work during the past year has been about shifting to that model. Earlier, we mainly focused on public

benefit services (*gongyi fuwu* 公益服务), and we didn't charge anyone for anything. But now, if a village asks us to write a village song, they have to pay for our transportation, meals and accommodation, plus twenty to thirty thousand yuan. Ten thousand yuan go to the facilitators, and the rest is for the production fees. The clients can save on the second ten thousand if they don't want the song produced, but normally people want to see the process through to the end. We moved to the social enterprise model to make sure that our organization continues to operate. Besides, I think it shows that the village songs fulfill a social need—who would pay for something they didn't need?

The external conditions also need to be in place to make this project viable. It can't happen without the right timing, people, or place. In terms of right timing, if we had begun the project, say, ten years ago, probably no one would have wanted to invite us. In terms of right places, it's essential that there are villages that want village songs, and that we have built enough social networks. As to the right people, over the past decade, many ambitious, talented village cadres have taken office; they work for their hometowns passionately and have many supporters in the local communities. It wouldn't be possible to carry out our project if it weren't for these local leaders and this type of healthy cadre-mass relationship.

Right now, the rural residents are mostly women and the elderly. Women in the countryside, as you know if you've had some contact with them, are hardworking, responsible, and open-hearted. Many of them love their hometowns and want to do their part for the community. A lot of them also love singing. Local residents like them make it possible for us to use art as a working method.

Sun Heng once said, "Although I'm a singer, singing on my own is not my goal. My goal is to get everybody to open up and sing together." This is indeed our goal—for the villagers to sing their own songs. I believe creating village songs through collective writing is an innovation of ours, since I'm not aware of any similar projects. We have six village songs in our repertoire now, written for the villages of Nantang 南塘 and Dashenzhuang 大申庄 in Anhui; Haotang 郝堂 in Henan; Lianfeng 联丰村 in Chengkou County 城口县, Chongqing; Baidian 白甸村 in Anning County 安宁县, Yunnan; and Shichengzi 石城子 in Qinglong County 青龙县, Hebei. I didn't participate

in the creation of the first three songs, so I will focus on my experience with the latter three.

The Three Steps in Writing a Village Song

Whenever we arrive at a village, the first thing we do is visit as many residents as possible: the elderly, women, artists, youth returned from the city, and the village leaders. We collect materials and connect emotionally with the villagers through these visits. Most of the materials we collect during this stage are used for lyrics, but we also collect folk music and local tunes.

The second step is holding music workshops, which need to be carefully organized. They usually last for two to three days, and no more than ten villagers are invited. The only exception was made for Baidian, where we spent four days because we visited during the farmers' busiest season.

Fieldwork in the countryside is always unpredictable. Our work in Lianfeng went very smoothly, thanks to the community workers from the China New Rural Planning and Design Institute who were also working there. They were extremely familiar with the villagers and the life there, and helped make our writing experience nearly effortless.

Things didn't go as smoothly in Baidian, though. Several participants pulled out the day before the workshop. At the time some higher-level cadres were visiting the village. They had heard about our project and said that they wanted to visit our workshop. It made us really worried that no one would attend. At the same time, the village was hosting a resident artist project, and the company helping with the organizational work had trained about ten female students from the village to do volunteer work. The village head and secretary were so stressed out about the cadres' planned inspection that they summoned those volunteers and asked them to participate in our workshop. When I learned about that, I thought to myself, "What kind of village song is this going to be? We might as well call it a volunteers' song!" But there was nothing I could do about it.

Fortunately, when the workshop started, the middle-aged woman living next door brought her stool and joined us, and later the village head, the village secretary, and two male villagers also took part. We managed to come up with a village song that sounded quite nice.

Shichengzi was a totally different situation. At the beginning of the first morning session, seven female participants told me that they probably wouldn't be able to come to future sessions on time because their schedules were so full: "We need to get up at four in the morning and go up to the mountains to gather walnuts; then we have to see our kids to school and make breakfast. During the lunch break we'll need to go home and cook, and there are all kinds of chores in the afternoon, so we can't promise anything about the afternoon session either." I asked them, "If you're all so busy, why are you all here now?" They replied, "Because we want to support our village cadres. They work very hard and we can't let them down." "All right," I said, "how about proceeding with the morning session for now, and then see what comes next?" They agreed and when the session ended, I asked them whether they would be attending again in the afternoon, and they all replied, "Of course!"

To be honest, I was a bit discouraged when I heard that they came to the workshop simply for the sake of the village cadres and not because they were interested in a village song. Seeing their attitude change was a big surprise, and I'm fascinated by this aspect of our project—it's full of twists and turns.

Here are some of the activities that we do in a workshop:

1. Singing in Turn: One of the activities we designed is called "A Song of Mine." Everybody is asked to sing a favorite song from their childhood and explain why they chose the song. This activity is to encourage people to open up and sing.
2. Life Story: Village songs should focus on the villagers and their emotions. This activity helps everyone express their thoughts and builds trust among participants. At first, some female participants would break into laughter the moment they started talking or look down at the floor the whole time. After two days, however, many of those who couldn't finish a sentence in the beginning would turn out to be extremely expressive. Everyone has potential.
3. Painting: Why do we ask the villagers to paint? When we held this activity in Baidian, the village chief told us: "I only finished third grade. I don't know how to paint." I asked her to try anyway, and she ended

up painting something very unaffected and beautiful. I then explained to everybody why we pushed them to paint: a song won't be touching if it doesn't have emotion and color; in order to create lyrics with colorful imagery, we need to go through these steps and stimulate different creative faculties.

Stories behind Village Songs

What to say in the lyrics is very important when writing village songs. When we were doing interviews with the Lianfeng villagers, we often discussed topics about the environment. I learned that the village used to be surrounded by mountains and forests, but many of the forests were cleared and made into farmland. After the Reform and Opening Up, many villagers left to look for jobs elsewhere, and many of the fields reverted to forests. When I went to visit villagers living in the mountains, I saw a large sign there which read, "Caution: Black bears in the area," and thought I was in a fairyland.

Only later did I learn that there were indeed black bears in those mountains. There is one line in Lianfeng's village song that says: "There is no end to Lianfeng village songs, / black bears and wild boars are playing." This might sound upbeat, but the story behind it is actually quite sad: once, several villagers went up the mountain and caught a black bear cub. The mother bear chased the villagers, and although they finally let the cub go, the mother still hurt some of them. Our lyrics are inspired by real stories like this.

Baidian is a very scenic place with many lotus flowers, and the villagers there wanted to sing about their natural environment. I rushed to the lotus pond the evening we arrived because I love lotus flowers, but I ended up being driven away by the pungent smell of pesticides from the rose greenhouses nearby. The roses were pretty but poisonous because the growers sprayed pesticides on them every three days. For this reason, Baidian's village song is not about how good the natural environment is. How can we call that kind of environment good?

The lyrics of a village song also contain practical information specific to that location. I've learned a lot about crops from my interactions with the

villagers. For example, in Baidian, I learned that lotus roots stay fresh if you leave them in the mud. This is a natural method of preservation, but it also means that many village women spend much of the year digging and selling lotus roots, which is really exhausting work. I also got to know about *jiaobai* 茭白 in Baidian; before that, I'd only eaten *jiaobai* and didn't know how it was grown. I was wandering around in Baidian one day, and saw something moving in the water; it turned out to be the village secretary and her husband who were cutting *jiaobai*.

I have always wondered: is it right if a person who lives on grain doesn't know how grain is grown? I don't think so. I think that this ignorance is harmful for both the individual and the society. Take the poisonous roses for instance. It's true that the rose-growers are well aware that the roses are poisonous and the rose-buyers are not, but can we really say that the rose-buyers are completely innocent? If customers don't care about the origin of the products that they purchase and are unwilling to pay extra for things grown more sustainably, when they end up getting poisonous products, are they not responsible at all?

With these questions in mind, we included a lot of practical knowledge about crops in the village song lyrics. For instance, Baidian's song contains lines such as the following:

What is planted and grown in rows? Yams are planted and grown in rows;

What looks white and stout in mud? Lotus root looks white and stout in mud.

Collective Economy and Solidarity

Another important topic that came up regularly during our workshop discussions was collective economy and solidarity. With topics like this, people often fight over different concepts as if there's no way for them to coexist, and I find that kind of debate problematic. This was not the case when I talked to the villagers. They told me, in very plain language, that they liked individual farming when it was initially implemented in the early 1980s because suddenly there was enough food, and they immediately for-

got about the advantages of collectives. We all tend to take good things for granted, and only realize how precious they are when we lose them. Just like individual farming, collective farming has its advantages. There are things that you can't achieve by farming individually. Can we draw on historical lessons and come up with better alternatives? For example, can we combine collective and individual farming, and choose whichever is appropriate according to different conditions? Sometimes I find that young people are unwilling to listen to the experiences of earlier generations, but there's a limit to each individual's life experience, and it's important to learn from history. Speaking of collective farming nowadays, hopefully it can take the form of bottom-up cooperatives, not the top-down, rigid collectives of the past.

Here are some examples of bottom-up cooperatives. Baidian villagers invested in and built a smokehouse together. They each contributed 50 yuan, and the government gave them each 350 yuan as subsidy for the shared capital. In Shichengzi, the villagers first established a cooperative. Because their village regulations prohibited the use of herbicides, they wanted the cooperative to purchase the chestnuts grown sustainably by the villagers, so that the price would be thirty *fen* higher per unit than the market price of the chestnuts not sustainably grown. I think these are all innovative responses to historical lessons, and this is how they are represented in our lyrics:

Stones, large and small, are joined in a solid bond.²

We are willing to pull weeds with our bare hands, to keep the land in good stead.

Village Cadres and Songs of Praise

One of the most profound realizations I gained in working in the countryside this year is that village cadres are extremely different from one another. When we went to Lianfeng, the village's First Secretary picked us up at the long-distance bus station. On our way to the village, he told us that he had been sent down from the city to stay for a year, and in the three months he had been there, he had only returned home once a week. His devotion to the village really moved me, and I don't think anyone can fake that. After

we came up with the village song, he was so excited. He was very skilled at mobilization, and that night he was able to find the resources to throw a gala for the villagers. All the village cadres who showed up at the gala were quite friendly and unassuming.

In Baidian, there was a village chief who had only finished third grade. She always emphasized her lack of education, but she actually spoke very good Mandarin. She worked in the fields during the daytime. According to her, when the new subdistrict director took office, they started having at least one meeting a week; before that, the village cadres had only met once a year.³ She said that she and many other village cadres had thought about quitting, and if it hadn't been for the fact that the new subdistrict cadre was genuinely serving the villagers, she would not have been able to continue. Her monthly wage is only one thousand to two thousand yuan—what could she possibly gain from this job? To support her family, she has to rely on working the land. When we were making Baidian's village song, she was really devoted and tried very hard to learn how to sing it. Later, during the harvest festival, a stage was built in the village and everybody who had mastered the song would go onstage and sing. After the festival was over and the audience was gone, she said, "Let's sing it one more time." So she and the villagers went onstage and sang once more. Their passion was incredible.

However, when I mentioned these cadres to a good friend, he got very upset. He asked me, "How can you praise people from the government like this?" I replied, "It's because I saw that they were doing things this way. If they do a good job, why can't I praise them?" We disagreed and got into a quarrel. He's not alone in this. Some friends whom I've discussed this project with in WeChat groups are also extremely resistant to the "praising" tone of some of the village songs.

It's not that we didn't see any problems in the villagers' stories. For instance, we heard that many women had gender-related problems. But in the end, when we were revising the lyrics, they asked us to leave out anything related to their suffering. I understand their reasoning, which is often something like, "This is not a song about me; it's supposed to represent our village." We can certainly critique these songs, but we absolutely need to respect the villagers' wishes. Their feelings are sincere.

The three places we visited are all located in mountainous areas: Lian-

feng and Baidian are quite remote, and Shichengzi is even deeper in the mountains. The villagers there had a lot of good things to say about finally having access to electricity and roads. Unlike the plains, where one main road is enough, in Shichengzi there are many small roads leading up to natural villages scattered across the hills, without which it is simply impossible for the villagers to leave. When we asked the Shichengzi villagers to paint, one of them painted roads. He said that since the road construction, his life had completely changed. Both his painting and words were filled with gratitude to the local government.

There are also many villagers who are grateful for the abolition of the agricultural tax.⁴ The gratitude is genuine, but it also reveals the limitations of their perspectives. The agricultural tax has indeed been abolished, but the grain prices are so low! Still, we can't force villagers to feel a certain way. Not all of them can understand the relationship between low grain prices and international and domestic politics. This is why I feel that we should not dismiss the villagers' gratitude. Of course, during our interactions, we can offer different perspectives and ideas, which is equally important.

The Problem of Subjectivity

We hope that the process of creating village songs will reflect the villagers' subjectivity. But what is subjectivity, exactly? Sometimes, after doing interviews, I feel that both my interviewees and I have been changed. Since our ideas are always prone to change, subjectivity also changes over time. I'll explain this with an interesting example. On our first day in Shichengzi, we tried to collect materials for songwriting but very few people spoke up. On the second day, however, people had changed a lot, as if their passion and energy had suddenly been stimulated, and I gathered many materials within a short time.

When it came to writing the music, people became even more enthusiastic and involved. Sun Heng suggested that we try out tunes together according to the melody and rhythm inherent in the lyrics. But the villagers felt that it was different from what they had imagined. They thought that the song we were writing using this method wasn't lyrical enough and sounded too much like a nursery rhyme. We explained that we couldn't use the pop

song melody that they had suggested because it didn't fit, and that we could have used one from local folk songs, but we couldn't find any in the area. We reassured the villagers that the music we came up with together actually had the unique flavor of *jingyun* drums. We also explained why it was too late to change the music—given the method we were using, changing the music would also mean rewriting the lyrics, and we simply didn't have time.

In the end, the villagers agreed to continue writing the music using our method, and it turned out that the more people sang it, the more they liked it. When the song finally took shape, people were talking about throwing a party.

This is the chorus of Shichengzi's village song:

Shichengzi Village! Embraced by mountains and hills,
 Shichengzi people! Honest and practical,
 Shichengzi Village! Remain true to our original aspirations,⁵
 Shichengzi people! Diligent and resilient.

This might seem like yet another “song of praise” at first glance, but what I wanted to say by discussing the creation process is that the lyrics are definitely realistic. Shichengzi *is* embraced by mountains, and Shichengzi people *are* very honest. The phrase “remain true to our original aspirations” refers to the infrastructural changes that have happened over the past seven years described by the village secretary, as well as to the women who get up at four in the morning to work in the fields and the men who become migrant workers to support their families. Every line in the lyrics shows how people truly feel about the village and themselves.

Community Culture and a New Ecological Civilization

For us, art and literature are working methods. If language is a tool of communication, human bodies, written characters, and art and literature can all count as languages. They bind people together in the same way that a reading room, dance troupe, or cooperative does. Also, a village song has its own unique attractions. We hope that village songs can be used to transmit community culture. When I interviewed a former party secretary of Shichengzi, he told me about how his father had escaped from the Japanese during the

Sino-Japanese War, so we invited him to our workshop to share the story with the others. He was very moved and said that he hadn't expected a chance to tell these stories in his eighties. He made a great contribution to our project. History needs to be transmitted, and our project provides a channel for that.

Creation and transmission are equally important. Our society has gone through different stages of civilizations: agricultural, industrial, and now the information age. But as I said in the beginning, I think that the biggest challenge facing our society and the earth today is the ecological crisis, so we need to create a new ecological civilization. When we sing a line as simple as "we are willing to pull weeds with our bare hands," I feel like it's already the start of the creation of a new ecological culture.

Village songs can also unite a community and motivate its development. At the end of each session, we asked the villagers to tell us how they felt, and the most common feedback we got was "extremely surprised, happy, and moved." Some young people said that before, they'd never cared to learn the village history, and they had never sat down and chatted with the senior villagers. Some people from distant natural villages hardly had any chance to gather, and they told us that our project provided an opportunity for them to meet each other. Many villagers also said that they'd never spoken up about their own stories, and it seemed that they learned to understand and value themselves through sharing their personal experiences. This is the beginning of a process of inspiring one another. Solidarity will only develop as a result of mutual understanding.

When we began the Village Song Project, the second anniversary of Chinese Farmers' Harvest Festival was also underway. To celebrate it, Chinese Central Television (CCTV) selected seventy villages countrywide for a live broadcast, and Shichengzi was one of them. We tried to finish the village song by the time of the festival, so that the villagers could sing it together on the broadcast. Village songs are name cards that facilitate the communication between villages and the outside world.

Village songs are part of culture. Material wealth and cultural wealth are equally important. We all have energy to spend, but until we find a direction to pursue, that energy can't be transformed into creativity. Cultural wealth can help us find the direction and awaken our subjectivity and con-

fidence. In the process, we bond with and learn from one another. Village songs are the crystallization of this communal labor.

Q&A

Q: Although village songs are written and released with the villagers' consent, is it possible that the current focus on praising the beauty of the villages could hide the oppression and problems there? Why did you choose to create village songs from the perspective of "name cards" instead of from the perspective of revealing problems?

A: Oppression comes in many forms, and one of them is gender oppression. In one of our writing sessions, there were three men and nine women, including me. All nine of us women had daughters, and some women talked about the hardships they had endured for only having daughters, such as ostracism and mental abuse. In another village, many of the women broke into tears when sharing their stories. However, the villagers themselves didn't want these stories in the lyrics. We had a video that contained a scene of a woman weeping. After the video was posted online, the woman asked us to cut that scene. What she was saying in the video was inaudible, but she insisted. When it comes to situations like this, we can't decide for the villagers. So, although we touched upon many issues during the writing process, they didn't necessarily emerge in the final lyrics. It's not a bad thing for a village to have a name card. We talk about problems when there are problems, but we also need to respect the decisions made by the people who invited us to write the village songs.

Q: Is it possible for the Village Song Project to be popularized in other villages around the country? Is this form suitable for being widely popularized?

A: It really depends on whether the timing, place, and people are right. A while ago a certain village wanted to invite us to do a song project, and they were willing to pay us more than what we asked. But in the end, we didn't go because it turned out that it was only the village cadres who wanted a village song, and we heard that the cadre-mass relationship there was not ideal. We told them that we needed at least ten villagers to participate in the

project, and they seemed reluctant. This is what I mean by the right timing, place, and people. A village has to have a leader that the people trust, a more or less solid mass basis, and maybe some practical need for a village song. If we write a village song only to find that nobody wants to sing it, then there's no point.

Q: So, do the villagers sing and you play the instrumental accompaniment?

A: Yes, that's how it works when we do live recordings. Sun Heng plays and the villagers sing. But when we do the professional recording sessions in Pinggu, since we can't invite the villagers, we do the vocals ourselves.

Q: I have a question about the New Workers Band. I tried to buy some of the band's CDs online, but they weren't for sale on any major e-commerce platforms. Can you open venues for online sales of these albums? Are there any plans to put out albums and books for the Village Song Project?

A: Thank you. We haven't paid much attention to the e-commerce platforms, and the New Workers Band has never put their albums online, so there's no way to find them there. But they did put out CDs, and we usually sell them during live performances or give them out as gifts. When people sponsor our "Earth Folk" tour, we also give our albums as gifts. As for village songs, Sun Heng told the villagers that when a song is finished, we will form a village performance troupe, and once we have ten songs for ten villages, the troupes will visit one another's villages or put on shows together. With this in mind, I believe there will be albums for the village songs. We can release an album once we have ten or twenty titles, which is not difficult, and our songs will be recorded in professional studios. The copyright belongs to those who pay for the project, like the township government or the subdistrict office, and we need to get their permission, which I don't think will be difficult either. As for books, I'm not so sure. It seems that books can't reach workers and villagers as easily as in-person communication, so I'm not sure if I want to spend my energy writing another book. But I do write work diaries every time I finish a project.

Q: Have village songs become vanity projects for village cadres?

A: I guess you could say that, but we hope there is some correspondence between appearance and reality.

Q: You mentioned that Sun Heng is in charge of writing the music for the village songs. Maybe I missed something, but why not invite the villagers to participate in the music part as well? Could you please say more about the creation of the music?

A: Sure. I mentioned earlier that there are two parts to our preparation for the project—gathering lyrics and gathering local folk songs. Once we arrive in a village, we first visit local art lovers and those who can sing folk songs. In Lianfeng, we originally wanted to use a type of local tune called *luogucuo* 锣鼓草 for the music, but the only person who could sing it said he hadn't sung it for over forty years, and that he couldn't sing it anymore. So we had no choice but to ask him to talk about the history of the tune instead. He told us that the tune had a long history, and the last time people sang it often was during the collectivization period. At that time, some people would sing the tune while playing drums, and it motivated the others to work harder. After the household contract responsibility system was implemented, people didn't work collectively anymore so there was no more need for such singing, and that's why he hadn't sung it for so long. Although we couldn't hear the *luogucuo* tune, we did find a woman who knew other folk songs of the area. If you watch the production video for "The Mountains and Waters of Lianfeng," you can hear her singing *baogu* 包谷 tunes.

Of all three village songs I've worked on, perhaps only Lianfeng's had a direct contribution by the villagers in terms of music. In that village, there was a community worker from the China New Rural Planning and Design Institute who knew the villagers very well. Once, he introduced us to a senior in his eighties who could sing many mountain songs. The old man led his own team—we were divided into teams when writing village songs—and helped revise the lyrics. For the music, he would hum some melodies first, and we would develop them together.

In Shichengzi and Baidian, the villagers only sang pop songs, which did not fit the lyrics. But now I'm wondering whether there are actually more people who are familiar with folk music in these villages than we thought.

Each village's situation is different, and you need to adapt to the local conditions and work with what you have.

Q: Will you continue to create songs about urban workers? Which aspect will you focus on more in the future, village songs or urban workers' songs?

A: The New Worker Band has six members now, and several are singer-songwriters, such as Xu Duo, Sun Heng, Lu Liang, and Guoliang. Lu Liang just wrote a song about miners—he himself worked as a miner for over ten years. Xu Duo is still working in Picun. Many songs from our new album, *Start Anew* (*Cong tou yue* 从头越), are adapted from poems written by members of the Picun Literature Group. I believe that we should keep doing this kind of work. As for the village songs, we've just started.

Another point is that some migrant workers are returning to the countryside. One graduate of our Worker University who worked in the city for over twenty years returned to his home village after realizing that rural decline and food insecurity were problems. Although he only has few *mu* of land, he very courageously started planting using natural farming methods. This is an example of how many people now, including migrant workers, are thinking about ways that urban and rural areas can help each other.

Notes

- 1 With Lü Tu's approval, the talk has been edited and shortened by the translator. For the original Chinese text, see Lü 2019.
- 2 The name of the village, Shichengzi, means "city of stones."
- 3 A subdistrict director (*Jiedao zhuren* 街道主任) is the director of the subdistrict offices (*Jiedao banshichu* 街道办事处), which are on the same administrative level as towns (*xiang* 乡 or *zhen* 镇).
- 4 The agricultural tax was abolished on January 1, 2006.
- 5 *Buwang chuxin* 不忘初心. In his speech of July 1, 2016, at the celebration of the ninety-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping called upon Party members to "remain true to our original aspirations and keep moving forward as we face the future and its challenges." Subsequently, "remaining true to our original aspirations" became a common slogan.

References

- Lü, Tu 吕途. 2013. *Zhongguo xin gongren: Mishi yu jueqi* 中国新工人: 迷失与崛起 (*China's New Workers: Lost and Rising Up*). Beijing: Falü chubanshe.
- Lü, Tu 吕途. 2015. *Zhongguo xin gongren: Wenhua yu mingyun* 中国新工人: 文化与命运 (*China's New Workers: Culture and Destiny*). Beijing: Falü chubanshe.
- Lü, Tu 吕途. 2017. *Zhongguo xingongren: Nügong zhuanji* 中国新工人: 女工专辑 (*China's New Workers: Biographies of Women Workers*). Beijing: Sanlian shudian.
- Lü, Tu 吕途. 2019. "Honest Food Lecture Series no. 11: Lü Tu—Village Songs and the Building of Community Culture." *People's Food Sovereignty Network in China*, November 19. <http://www.shiwuzq.com/portal.php?mod=view&aid=2072>.
- Yan, Hairong, Ku Hok Bun, and Xu Siyuan. 2020. "Rural Revitalization, Scholars, and the Dynamics of the Collective Future in China." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 4: 853–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2019.1694911>.