Chinese Workers' Literature in the 20th and 21st Centuries

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Summary

"Chinese workers' literature" is an umbrella term that comprises diverse writings by workers, for workers, and about workers. In the 1930s, roughly at the same time that an international proletarian arts movement was flourishing, a factory-based reportage literature—mostly written by leftist intellectuals and partly inspired by Russian and Japanese experiments—developed in semicolonial Shanghai. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, writings by workers themselves were officially promoted and published in state-supported venues. Largely consisting of edifying stories, poems, and plays, workers' literature from the 1950s to the 1970s provided models of behavior and contributed to a shared sense of dignity among industrial workers; it was, however, severely limited in its expressive range. Along with the implementation of market reforms beginning in the 1980s and the privatization and contracting out of most state-owned industry, a new literature emerged in the Special Economic Zones of South China and has grown into a heterogeneous phenomenon encompassing poetry and prose written by countless rural-to-urban migrant workers, the mainstay of the country's new workforce. These writings have been appreciated for their intimate portrayals of the human costs of economic development, for giving voice to the silent majority of precarious laborers who have made it possible, and for potentially restituting a measure of dignity to a social group whose members were once considered "masters of the country" but who, in the early 21st century, enjoy little job security and few rights.

While it is possible to hear resonances across these disparate times and locations, much has changed along the way, including the social position of the worker and the groups associated with this term, the forms they have experimented with and the media through which their writings circulate, and the extent to which the workers have actively contributed to its production and circulation.

Keywords: proletarian literature, reportage, socialist literature, postsocialist literature, dagong literature, new worker literature, migrant worker literature, battler literature

Subjects: Asian Literatures, 20th and 21st Century (1900-present), Non-Fiction and Life Writing, Poetry, Cultural Studies

Literature, Revolution, and the Search for a Common Language

The aspiration for a Chinese literature written by, for, and about workers can be traced back to the 1920s. After the 1911 Revolution, China's territory was divided into regions partly governed by local warlords linked to foreign interests. In this national crisis, intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 and Hu Shi 胡适 launched the New Culture Movement in the late 1910s, aimed at reforming the very foundations of Chinese culture that they held responsible for the country's plight. Their

call for a literary revolution—for a literature written in the vernacular rather than in classical Chinese and hence accessible to more people—was one of many attempts to eradicate the inequalities that shaped the production of culture. Meanwhile, rapid industrialization in semicolonial Shanghai was attracting increasing numbers of migrants from regions affected by conflicts, floods, and famines. The rise of the popular press and new forms of mass culture contributed to the visibility of the emergent urban proletariat and those living in the quarters "beyond the neon lights."[1]

Throughout the 1920s, most Chinese writers were affiliated with literary societies whose members shared basic principles and published in the same venues.[2] Writers emphasized the differences between the various societies, but most shared a concern with how to represent the lower classes. Lu Yin 庐隐's "Can You Sell Your Soul?" (Linghun keyi mai ma? 灵魂可以卖吗? 1921) published in *Short Story Monthly* (*Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小说月报), which was then controlled by the Literary Association (*Wenxue yanjiu hui* 文学研究会), was probably the first story to feature a modern factory worker. It vividly depicts the physical and mental toll that the factory regime takes on a spinning girl in a large cotton mill, describing how she begins to think of herself as "a fairly good machine." The title alludes to the question that the worker asks the narrator, who is thus disabused of her illusion that she can help the worker by lending her money.[3]

Writers in the Creation Society (*Chuangzao she* 创造社), an avant-garde group that challenged the monopoly of the Literary Association, wrote passionately about the relation between cultural production and labor, introducing new concepts of the social function of art.[4] Another early short story featuring a factory worker is "Nights of Spring Fever" (Chunfeng chenzui de wanshang 春风沉醉的晚上, 1924) by Yu Dafu 郁达夫, an author associated with the Creation Society, which depicts a cash-strapped writer-translator sharing a partitioned room with a woman worker employed in a Shanghai cigarette factory and grappling with the commonalities between them. At the same time, many writers questioned their own ability to adequately portray and mobilize the lower classes, doubting that they could truly reach them.[5]

Increased political mobilization in China's urban centers and the prospect of Japanese imperialist aggression led to a general radicalization of the literary field in the second half of the 1920s. A major event contributing to this radicalization was the May Thirtieth Incident of 1925, when British police shot labor protesters in Shanghai's International Settlement. The incident, the largest antiforeign demonstration in China up to that point, provoked a wave of strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts of foreign goods. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921 and allied with the Nationalists (KMT) until 1927, grew considerably during this time, as did the influence of Marxism in literary circles. Violent repression by the KMT government in 1927 and the ensuing White Terror forced the CCP to go underground and retreat to rural areas. But it was precisely the political repression that led to the flourishing of a left-leaning literature that sought to document the conditions of the urban proletariat. Efforts were made to expand literacy, and editorial projects were launched that collected the voices of the common people and captured the details of their daily lives.[6] Nonetheless, due to unequal access to education and other factors, writings by workers themselves largely remained an aspiration; the documentation of working-class lives was mostly carried out by professional writers and journalists who had varying degrees of familiarity with them.

Writers of the Creation Society and the Sun Society engaged in a wide-ranging debate on revolutionary literature in 1928. The younger intellectuals attacked the writers associated with the New Culture Movement, whose soul-searching they saw as out of step with the times. Cheng Fangwu 成仿吾's "From a Literary Revolution to a Revolutionary Literature" (Cong wenxue geming dao geming wenxue 从文学革命到革命文学, 1928), one of the earliest texts to articulate the function of literature in terms of base and superstructure, urged the revolutionary intelligentsia to acquire class consciousness and "make our medium approach the spoken language of the worker and peasant masses."[7] In a similar vein, the writer Jiang Guangci 蒋光慈 declared that committed writers ought to "take the oppressed masses as their starting point."[8] Whether this process of self-transformation was actually possible, however, remained a question for decades to come.[9] Similar discussions took place among leftist writers and artists in Japan, Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States, contributing to a global movement of proletarian arts that lasted into the 1930s and that encompassed a broad range of practices and media.[10]

A crucial problem that emerged from these debates was the relation between intellectuals and the workers—a relation that was often mapped onto the tension between written and spoken language. Paradoxically, attempts to bridge the gap between social groups and means of expression sometimes had the effect of reifying the distinctions. In the early 1930s, the influential Marxist literary critic, Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, scathingly criticized intellectuals who saw themselves as "teachers" separate from the workers, and he attacked the debates on the popularization of literature as empty talk. The main problem, in his view, was the enduring separation between written and spoken Chinese and the lack of a common written language based on speech. Far from creating a real "common people's literature," the New Culture Movement had only led to "a new classical vernacular" that was distorted by the import of foreign grammars and was incomprehensible when read aloud.[11] Qu urged writers to model their diction on the speech of the urban proletariat.[12] Taking into account the regional differences across South and West China, he conceded that in some places it might be necessary to use some local dialect in writing, but overall emphasized that "for revolutionary popular literature and art, it is especially important that it begin by making use of the *most simple* proletarian street vernacular."[13] The gold standard for popular literature, in short, was that it ought to be understandable when read aloud.

Qu Qiubai's notion of a truly revolutionary (and truly popular) literature rested on common assumptions about the superiority of speech, largely considered as "a more authentic, less mediated approximation of truth."[14] While not unique to China, such privileging of speech was widely shared among the promoters of a new literature and presupposed a linguistic homogeneity that was nowhere to be found. Even though in January 1920 the Ministry of Education had decreed that the vernacular ought to be taught in all schools, in fact, Chinese people spoke a variety of regional languages, and written Chinese, too, was far from unified.[15] At this time of linguistic experimentation, writers sought to invent new ways to communicate effectively across regional and social groups.[16] Debates on language continued well into the mid-1930s, most notably in the discussions on "mass language" (*dazhongyu* 大众语) in 1934, which paralleled efforts to collect popular songs, folk tunes, and ballads written by workers and miners.[17]

Meanwhile, experiments with producing a workers' culture were not limited to the written medium alone. Faced with low levels of literacy and mounting censorship, activists resorted to woodblock prints and to theater. Partly inspired by Soviet agitprop, a group of young theorists who had studied modern Western-style drama in Japan formed the Art Theater Society in Shanghai and staged a few performances, including a play about textile workers written by the poet Feng Naichao 冯乃超, but their efforts were soon suppressed. In 1931, the prominent dramatist, Tian Han 田汉, founded the League of Left-Wing Dramatists with the aim of creating a new "public theater" (*dazhong xiju* 大众戏剧) for the urban working class. Tian's experiments, along with those carried out by the dramatist and educator Xiong Foxi 熊佛西 in rural areas, laid the groundwork for "street theater" and other dramatic genres that flourished in the interior regions during wartime and later became an integral part of Chinese revolutionary culture.[18]

Factory-Based Reportage

The League of Left-Wing Writers was founded in 1930 in Shanghai with the goal of forming a broad anticapitalist, antiimperialist alliance and building a proletarian literary movement.[19] Several of the writers adopted literary reportage, which had been widely promoted in leftist literary circles in Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union. They were especially inspired by the works of Egon Erwin Kisch, which arrived in China through Japanese translation.[20]

Most of the reportage pieces published in the League journals convey the discomfort of narrators who find themselves confronted with workers' harsh labor and living conditions for the first time, and vividly capture the brutal regimentation of the workers' bodies and their reduction to inert appendixes of the industrial machines. Several of them focus on women laborers who were hired in large numbers because they were considered cheaper and more docile than male workers.[21] So deeply dehumanizing are the working conditions revealed by such texts as Xia Yan 夏衍's "Indentured Laborers" (Baoshengong 包身工, 1936) and Peng Zigang 彭子冈's "Beside the Machines" (Zai jiqi pangbian 在机器旁边, 1936) that they critique not just the particular factories depicted but industrial production *tout court*.[22] By contrast, "Eight Months of My Life" (Bayue shenghuo 八月生活, 1936) by the prominent writer Ding Ling 丁玲is told from the perspective of a printing apprentice who develops an intimate relationship with the printing presses. The narrator describes them as benevolent monsters "wearing steel coats and standing on iron feet" and as "adorable huge machines" who need the apprentices' care. The oppression that the apprentice and her fellow workers experience comes from their bosses, who continuously harass them in various ways, depending on their looks:

> It seems that we are just too bad, wrong at every turn, our ears, mouths, and noses are all reasons for complaint. For example, we often hear: "Look at those eyes, what a crook!" or, "Shut that goddam mouth of yours, okay?" With the pretty ones, though—and there are some good-looking gals among us. . . But all in all, it's better to be on the ugly side.[23]

The apprentices' sole comfort is caring for the presses. When the printshop eventually shuts down, they are distressed not only because they are homeless and unemployed, but also because they do not know what will happen to the presses.

Even though short forms of reportage were deemed the most appropriate for bridging social gaps, established writers such as Mao Dun 茅盾and Lao She 老舍also wrote longer fiction focusing on the laboring classes. Mao Dun's novella "Spring Silkworms" (Chuncan 春蚕, 1932) details how the livelihood of sericulture farmers is ruined by the import of foreign fibers, and his novel *Midnight* (*Ziye*子夜, 1933) includes descriptions of working conditions based on interviews and visits to factories and slums.[24] Lao She's celebrated novel, *Rickshaw Boy* (*Luotuo Xiangzi* 骆驼祥子, 1937), takes a sympathetic position toward its protagonist, a Beijing rickshaw puller, and often adopts his point of view while also maintaining an external perspective that aims to offer a more objective analysis of the economic forces shaping his fate. Much of the power of the novel derives from its use of free indirect discourse combining the two perspectives—that of the protagonist who struggles his entire life to buy a rickshaw and that of a generally sympathetic narrator who purports to have a deeper understanding of why the protagonist's ambitions will come to naught. Like the experiments in reportage, the novel was based on the author's first-hand observation of labor conditions among the Beijing working class—in this case, the rickshaw pullers—and in part aspires to be a sociological study of this group. Lao She's novel has been lauded for its use of Beijing colloquialisms and conventionally interpreted as an indictment of individualism, but it does not offer any uplifting description of collective action. It does present, however, a critique of capitalism as a system in which those at the bottom of the social ladder suffer the most.[25]

Most worker-oriented cultural activities disappeared with the start of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, after the League was disbanded to meet the needs of a new "national defense literature" and many activists moved to China's interior. The relation between workers and machines would reemerge as a prominent theme in later decades.

Politics in Command

After a grueling Long March to escape the Nationalists and build popular support inland, the CCP located its headquarters in Yan'an, a city in Shaanxi, North China, in 1935. Yan'an became a rallying point for leftist intellectuals, who mostly came from urban centers and had little familiarity with rural life. In his 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" (Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话), Mao Zedong 毛泽东 addressed this problem, reiterating several of the propositions put forth in the 1930s debates. Mao argued that the goal of literature was to serve the people, specifically the workers, peasants, and soldiers, and he criticized the writers and artists for being "estranged" from them.[26] Intellectuals were to unlearn their own language and draw from "popular life," as "[r]ich deposits of literature and art actually exist in popular life itself: they are things in their natural forms, crude but also extremely lively, rich, and fundamental."[27] The influence of the Yan'an Talks cannot be overstated. Addressing the problem of intellectuals' "credentials" to write about the proletariat, the Yan'an Talks stated that they should write about the masses, provided that both the writer and the forms they employed underwent intensive remolding. Reforming and popularizing expressive forms that were previously considered the exclusive purview of elites, on

the one hand, and selectively adapting popular and local forms, on the other, remained at the center of Chinese cultural politics well into the 1970s and the effects are still felt in the early 21st century.

The party made consistent efforts to train authors coming from less privileged backgrounds and construct a literature called "worker-peasant-soldier literature" (*gongnongbing wenxue* 工农兵文学), which was expected to be about, for, and by the masses.[28] Several "worker writers" and "peasant writers" rose to national prominence, often as a result of selective narrativization of their lives and complex processes of canonization that took various factors into account, including the author's class background, education level, current profession, and the themes of their work. With the founding of the PRC in 1949 and a renewed emphasis on modernization and industrialization, "how to narrate the worker became an urgent issue confronting contemporary Chinese literature," which was tasked with consolidating a unified revolutionary imaginary and reflecting the new position of peasants and workers as "masters of the nation."[29] But, despite the talk of a shared identity between authors and their protagonists, their relationship remained problematic. Some writers who wrote about workers lived their entire lives in the communities they portrayed, but they did so primarily as state employees in charge of creating models to emulate—an institutional arrangement that entailed a certain division of labor between intellectual and manual work. Nonetheless, this division was continuously challenged, especially at times of political radicalization when writers participated in manual labor or were sent to the countryside to be "reeducated" by the peasants, and when common people with no previous training or writing experience were encouraged to write.

Among the prominent writers of the socialist era, Li Ji 李季was named the "petroleum poet" (*shiyou shiren* 石油诗人) because he wrote extensively about oil workers in the Yumen oilfield in Gansu province. Li was born to a Henan peasant family and after completing middle school in 1938, he joined the Anti-Japanese Military and Political University in Yan'an. In 1946, drawing on folk songs, he published the narrative poem, *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang* (*Wang Gui yu Li Xiangxiang* 王贵与李香香). Li worked as a teacher and editor and soon after the founding of the PRC, he was appointed head of the CCP Propaganda Department in Yumen and traveled extensively to other oilfields throughout China. He published six poetry collections, including the *Yumen Poetry Chapbook* (*Yumen shichao* 玉门诗抄, 1955) and *A Salute to Oil Workers* (*Zhi yi shiyou gongren de jingli* 致以石油工人的敬礼, 1956), as well as eight long narrative poems, several of which extol the hard work, fearlessness, and self-sacrifice of the oil workers. Li Ji's verses, mostly in the genre of "political lyric" (*zhengzhi shuqing shi* 政治抒情诗) characterized by effusive language, fixed symbolism, and the blending of narrative and lyricism, were celebrated for their experimentation with folkloric forms and for the poet's direct observation and immersion in the workers' lives. They depict the new world that was ushered in thanks to the efforts of thousands of laborers, exemplifying the new socialist man's ability to extract resources, transform the landscape, and expand the geographical reach of the new socialist nation.[30]

Another writer who focused on industrial workers is Cao Ming 草明 (real name Wu Xuanwen 吴绚文). After four years in Yan'an, Cao Ming moved to northeastern China in late 1945, where she worked as special correspondent and trade union organizer.[31] Her *Motive Force* (*Yuandongli* 原动力, 1948) is among the first Chinese novels to focus on industrial workers. Praised for its thematic

focus and immediately translated into Russian and several other foreign languages, it portrays a peasant-turned-worker who saves a power plant from destruction by the Nationalists, inaugurating a recurring trope in socialist workers' literature: the workers' efforts to protect the infrastructure from enemy attempts at sabotage.[32] In these narratives, the machines appear more precious than individual human lives, because it is thanks only to machines that collectivities can prosper.[33] The novel's setting in the remote mountains of Heilongjiang, moreover, demonstrated that industrialization was not a unique prerogative of Shanghai and other urban centers, and served to underscore the close links between workers and peasants.[34] Her next work *Locomotive* (火车头, 1950), by contrast, depicts a large railway plant in the industrial hub of Shenyang. In 1954, Cao Ming was appointed deputy party secretary at Anshan Steelworks (Angang) in Liaoning province, where she also taught writing classes to the workers. Her novel *Riding the Wind and Waves* (*Chengfeng polang* 乘风破浪, 1959), a "symphony of vitalist productivity" depicting ingenious workers who fight against managerial conservatism, was critically acclaimed and set a model for aspiring worker writers.[35]

Amateur Writers and Collective Writing

As a writer, educator, and cadre, Cao Ming sought to contribute to the party's efforts to bridge the gap between manual and intellectual labor and create a socialist working-class culture. In her words,

> I asked myself a question: "The working class is making such great contributions to the state, so what should I do? Can we just rely on a bunch of intellectuals to write about so many heroic feats and ebullient lives?" My answer was, "We can't, of course we can't." I had to find a solution—make sure that workers, peasants, and soldiers themselves start writing.[36]

These considerations prompted her to initiate the Anshan workers amateur writing group (*Anshan gongren yeyu chuangzuo zu* 鞍山工人业余创作组), in which she trained over two hundred writers in nine years. Each year, a different group of workers was selected to participate in the Sunday meetings devoted to studying Mao's Yan'an Talks and the basics of creative writing:

> For instance, when we talked about characterization, I would assign a short story featuring interesting characters that everyone had to read at home, and then we would discuss it in class. I'd first let the workers speak, and at the end I would fill in the gaps and sum things up by giving a few pointers. This method is far better than lecturing—it gives more thorough results. I never corrected their homework. I talked to them but never did anything for them. I just offered ideas on how to revise—I let them think about it, and then revise on their own.[37]

Some of the workers in the Anshan group had experienced war and migration and found a new home and job security at the factory, which at the time was the largest steel complex in China. Writing offered them an opportunity not only to claim dignity but also to express gratitude for the

better life they enjoyed in the newly founded socialist state. It was not only the protagonists of their stories who were models of heroism and dedication to collective labor. Judging from the biographies of the most prominent members, the authors' own literary paths also seem to follow a model trajectory, starting from harsh life experiences and little formal education, to joining the Anshan workers writing group, to a painstaking revising process, all the way to publication and, in some cases, literary fame.[38] Despite this apparent uniformity, however, some of their stories do illustrate different aspects of the workers' lives. A remarkable short story by Xu Guangfu 徐光夫, for example, offers a lively account of the marital strife and conflicts between private and professional life occurring when some Angang workers are sent south (specifically to Wuhan) to help develop the industries there, and includes sexual jokes among workers and supervisors who compare the steel furnaces to lovers.[39] In an essay introducing the Anshan worker writers in 1958, Cao Ming emphasized that their primary "teacher" was "nothing but the life of struggle itself."[40] Echoing the principles laid out by Mao's Yan'an Talks, she envisioned a circular relation between literature and life, with each serving as the "source" of the other, involving a painful process of struggle and transformation.[41]

Workers' cultural spaces, known as "Workers' Culture Palaces" or "Workers' Clubs" were built by the government throughout the Maoist era, and groups of amateur worker writers (*yeyu gongren zuozhe* 业余工人作者) were formed in several cities, the most prominent of which were the Workers' Literature Writing Group of Shanghai People's Radio Station (*Shanghai guangbo diantai de gongren wenxue xiezuo xiaozu* 上海广播电台的工人文学写作小组), established in 1952, and the Tianjin Workers' Literature Creation Society (*Tianjin shi gongren wenxue chuangzaoshe* 天津市工人文学创造社), set up in 1956.[42]

古元 工人上夜校 1950年 黑白木刻 23.5×28.5cm

Figure 1. Gu Yuan, "Workers Go to Night School," 1950—Black and white woodcut.

Figure 2. Gu Yuan, "Laboring People's Culture Palace," 1951—Black and white woodcut.

Coached by senior writers and critics such as Sun Li 孙犁 and Aying 阿英 (aka Qian Xingcun 钱杏邨), the workers typically started publishing autobiographical essays and short stories in local literary journals and newspaper supplements, but some went on to publish full-length novels with leading publishing houses, which allowed them to join the China Writers Association and, in some cases, win prizes and take up editorial positions. Attaining the status of professional writer was appealing for a variety of reasons, besides the desire to see one's creative labor recognized.

Afeng 阿凤 and Wan Guoru 万国儒were among the members of the Tianjin Workers' Literature Creation Society. Wan's depictions of humorous characters and his extensive use of nicknames are said to imitate the "peasant writer" Zhao Shuli 赵树理, a central figure in contemporary literature. Wan's story, "A Happy Farewell" (Huanle de libie 欢乐的离别, 1960), which depicts a worker's sentimental farewell to the hammer that he had used for forty years, foregrounds the ordinary workers' technical ingenuity and attachment to their skills at a time of mechanization and acceleration of production during the Great Leap Forward.[43] Literary historian Xie Baojie 谢保杰 laments that the workers' low cultural level, limited life experience, and overall political pressures significantly limited the depth and quality of their works, which rarely went beyond extolling the new things and new life under socialism. Being recognized as a worker writer was an honor but also posed limitations, as political needs and social pressures restricted their range of

forms and topics and confined them to narrow conventions.[44] Literary scholar Cai Xiang 蔡翔 speaks of Chinese proletarian culture in terms of "failure," but urges reconsideration of its legacies.[45]

Overall, according to current accounts of Chinese literary history, worker-related literature remained a relatively minor phenomenon from the 1950s to the 1970s, as the most influential socialist works of fiction and drama either featured wartime struggles or land reform. Several of the writers discussed in this section are nearly forgotten and are only recently being rediscovered, as the rise of new forms of workers' literature has prompted a reconsideration of the socialist past. Beyond the thematic focus, however, what appears most distinctive about Chinese socialist literary practices are the campaigns to transform everyone into a poet, often through collective writing sessions organized in workers' clubs and in villages. A notable instance is the "New Folk Song Movement," launched in 1958, when urban and rural workers were encouraged to put folksongs and poetry into writing, and thousands of largely anonymous works were printed in periodicals and anthologies.[46]

Mass writing experiments also took place during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). With its newfound centrality on the proletariat as an active subject, the political climate of the decade influenced the discussion and practice of workers' literature, rekindling the debates on proletarian literature from Qu Qiubai to the Yan'an Talks. Consistent with Mao's call to revolutionize the cultural superstructure, literature was tasked with rallying the proletariat against the remnants of the bourgeoisie and the threat of restoration, serving as an instrument of agitation and action.

Cultural Revolution workers' literature was characterized by a tension between the collectivization of writing, on the one hand, and strict limitations on expressive styles, on the other. Worker and nonworker authors tended to collaborate in its production, as intellectuals were mobilized to go to factories and villages to remold themselves while also training workers and peasants. Content had to be political and collective-oriented, replete with political-lyricist tropes (surging waves, red sun, mountains and valleys, dark past and glorious present) and exclamation marks. Drama and the performing arts were given priority over other expressive forms. In poetry, fixed form was privileged (but not exclusive) to reflect folk songs and acquire a stronger auditory appeal. Excerpts from Liu Xijie's 刘溪杰 "Worker Poets" (Gongren shiren 工人诗人, 1976) are illustrative:

> Ah, receiving the Leader's important instruction / a new level of creation unfolds before your eyes! / Ah, it is the theory of proletarian dictatorship / that confers on your poetry a new level of thought! / Repudiate futile laments, / don't trust any "inspiration" or "poetic talent." / Thick, callous hands hold spades of steel, / now putting pen to paper is billowing stormy waves![47]

The end of the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in 1978 also affected workers' literature—it was discarded as too politicized. As the country embraced a new era of market reforms, new literary expressions came to the fore, this time detached from larger political goals and much more diverse in form and intent.

Postsocialist Precarity

A new phase of Chinese workers' literature emerged in the mid-1980s when workers employed in the industrialized regions of South China began to publish their poetry in factory journals, informal handouts, and local literary magazines. The hotbed of this literary upsurge was the area where the first Special Economic Zone had been established in 1979: the cities of Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Guangzhou—the main destination of the rural-to-urban migrant laborers. Their literary output was termed "*dagong wenxue*" 打工文学 by local cultural official and critic Yang Honghai 杨宏海, one of the first to take an interest in and promote the new phenomenon. The word *dagong*, generally translated as "working for the boss," is used to indicate the new precarious, mobile labor force, distinct from traditional factory workers (*gongren* 工人), who had enjoyed lifelong employment and comprehensive welfare under the planned economy. The expression *dagong wenxue* has been rendered as "*dagong* literature," or "migrant worker literature," while the cognate expression *dagong shige* 打工诗歌 (*dagong* poetry) has also been translated as "battler (or battlers) poetry."[48]

Dagong literature is but one of the many facets of the extreme diversification of the Chinese literary scene since the 1980s, a period that some scholars have defined as "postsocialist" and that is characterized by commercialization, depoliticization, and the expansion of new media.[49] The appearance of the first column dedicated to migrant writings in the journal *Special Zone Literature* (*Tequ wenxue* 特区文学) in 1984, the awarding of the prestigious *Dapeng* Arts Prize to four worker poets in 1990, and the founding of the *Migrant Worker Poets* (*Dagong shiren* 打工诗人) magazine by a group of laborer poets in 2001 were major breakthroughs. The publication of the first two anthologies of migrant worker literature, *The Surge of Youth* (*Qingchun de yongdong* 青春的涌动) in 2000, edited by Yang Honghai, and *Selections of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry, 1985–2005* (*1985–2005 nian Zhongguo dagong shige jingxuan* 1985–2005年中国打工诗歌精选) in 2007, testified to its "growing recognition . . . as an established genre," as well as to increasing private sponsorship.[50] Over the years, in addition to various initiatives from below (unofficial journals, individual and collective blogs), sponsorship by cultural institutions (universities, journals, and the state-controlled China Writers Association) and other influential patrons such as established poets and artists has contributed to the formation of migrant worker literature as a genre and to the increasing fame of individual authors, some of whom have even been offered full-time positions as editors and cultural officials, generating controversy as to whether such career moves disqualify them from representing migrant workers.[51]

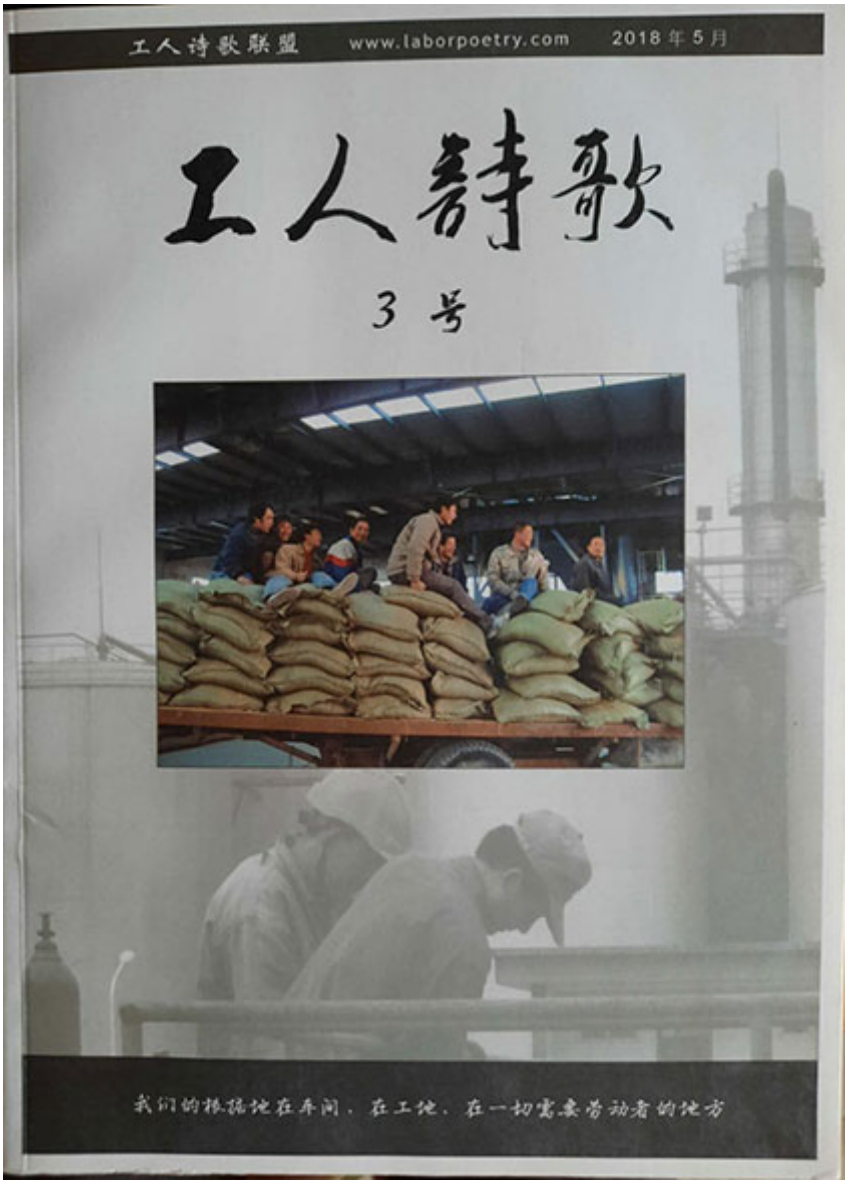

Figure 3. Cover of unofficial journal *Workers' Poetry*.

Local cultural institutions in Guangdong initially promoted *dagong* literature as a cultural trademark for the area, but contemporary workers' literature has since developed in other regions as well, following urbanization and industrialization and the subsequent expansion of labor migration. Other critics have therefore proposed "new workers' literature" (*xin gongren wenxue* 新工人文学) as a more inclusive term that also reflects the self-representations emerging from Beijing-based grassroots groups.[52] Overall, the conceptual demarcations of migrant worker literature are anything but clear-cut. Several authors identified as *dagong* writers maintain that the term fails to do justice to their authorial experience, imposing a label that they perceive as limiting, or even derogatory. In general, the problem boils down to issues of authorship, intended readership, and theme, unified by the question of legitimacy—whether workers' literature should be *by*, *for*, or more generally *about* workers. A possible solution is offered by laborer-author-

turned-critic Liu Dongwu 柳冬妩 who suggests that it be approached primarily as a porous, internally contradictory "process" bringing together a variety of singular experiences rooted in a shared condition of subalternity and wage exploitation.[53]

The Assembly Line

The assembly line has been the breeding ground of much post-1978 workers' literature, as exemplified by Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990–2014). A worker at the Foxconn plant in Shenzhen as well as a prolific and versatile poet, Xu became internationally famous after his suicide in September 2014. His story featured in *Iron Moon* (*Wo de shipian* 我的诗篇, 2015), a film directed by Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇 and Wu Feiyue 吴飞跃 to highlight the lives and creativity of worker poets. Qin also published Xu's posthumous collection *A New Day* (*Xin de yitian* 新的一天, 2015).

Xu's verse vividly describes the reality of the working and living spaces of Foxconn workers, from the shopfloor to the shared rooms of the company dormitories, the latter especially claustrophobic and oppressive, capturing the disturbing reality of what has been termed the "dormitory labor regime."[54] The iconic image of the "Terracotta Army on the Assembly Line" (Liushuixianshang de bingmayong 流水线上的兵马俑, 2013) conveys the barracks-like atmosphere of the factory:

> Along the line stand / Xia Qiu / Zhang Zifeng / Xiao Peng / Li Xiaoding / Tang Xiumeng / Lei Lanjiao / Xu Lizhi / Zhu Zhengwu / Pan Xia / Ran Xuemei / these workers who can't tell night from day / wearing / antistatic 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.[55]

The listing of names and uniforms rescues Xu's fellow workers from dehumanizing anonymity, while also giving literary dignity to technical vocabularies otherwise considered lowly and prosaic. The repetition of the word "antistatic" shifts attention from what renders them unique (their names) to the things that render them hardly distinguishable one from the other, conveying their shared condition of servitude. The allusion to the terracotta army that guards the tomb of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇, widely considered a tyrannical ruler, serves at once as a visual reference to one of the iconic sites of national and international tourism and as a reminder that not much has changed in terms of common people's subordination to the powerful after over two thousand years.

The factory regime colonizes the poet's imagination and the language drawn from that reality becomes a vehicle for denouncing exploitation, a condition that kills all hope:

> When I first set foot in this place / I hoped only for that gray slip on the tenth of each month / To grant me some belated solace / For this I had to grind away my corners, grind away my words / Refuse to skip work, refuse sick leave, refuse leave for private reasons / Refuse to be late, refuse to leave early / By the assembly line I stood straight like iron, hands like flight, / How many days, how many nights / Did I—just like that—standing fall asleep?[56]

The poet recalls the feeling of when he first began to work in the factory, when the prospect of getting his monthly salary kept him going. And yet even the hope for that "belated solace" soon wears off. Words that in themselves could signify resistance ("refuse") are instead employed to convey a paradox: that the worker is forced to refuse precisely the things that could save him from exhaustion. The latter is a central theme in Xu Lizhi's poetry.[57] The toll that the assembly line takes on the body is a common focus of post-1978 worker literature. In Xu Lizhi's verses, however, expressions of physical pain are replaced by chilling representations of destruction and the self-destruction of the worker's body, which is metaphorically associated with objects commonly found in the factory space:

> A screw plunges to the ground / working overtime at night / it drops straight down, with a faint sound / that draws no one's attention / just like before / on the same kind of night / a person plunged to the ground.[58]

The image of the screw was common in China's socialist cultural imagination until the late 1970s, epitomizing the workers' pride in contributing to a collective enterprise. By contrast, here it suggests the poet's precarious condition as an insignificant and replaceable thing.[59] Such change in imagery can be read as a reflection of the change in the relations of production and power and strikes a chord in readers who share the poet's sense of vulnerability.

Commodities

Xie Xiangnan 谢湘南 (b. 1974–) moved from his native Hunan to Shenzhen and spent his twenties working at different factories. The city repeatedly appears in his oeuvre, accompanying his own personal development. Xie's talent was eventually noticed and he was offered a full-time job in the local media. In his verses, the human body is juxtaposed with the machinery and manufactured commodities, as in the opening stanza of "Orders of the Front Lines" (Qianyan yishi 前沿轶事, 1999):

> My finest years went into the input feeder of a machine / I watched those five youthful years come out of the machine's / asshole—each formed into an elliptical plastic toy, / slippery, sometimes orange, / sometimes bright red and green eggshells. / (I've heard they're shipped to America, shipped / to Western Europe as Christmas toys, / sold one after another / to blue-eyed children. . .)[60]

The physical transformation of the workers' youth into colorful merchandise deprives him of any humanity. The image of commodities sailing away is an often-seen trope in workers' poetry, here stylistically reinforced by brackets suggesting uncertainty and affective detachment. The irreverent language ridicules the factory, exposing the laborer's alienation from his own labor, completely different from the solemn language employed by pre-1978 worker poets. The poem is therefore remindful of workers' commodification as a labor force, the kernel of capitalist production relations in Marxist terms.

Xie also displays his witty, ironic style when reflecting on the role of writing. He suggests the possibility of literature being appropriated by the laboring people, rescuing it from what he perceives as elite culture's divorce from reality:

> Let's have more / more poets like Xie Xiangnan / they don't come from the storm clouds above / but from the belly of the earth / from those workers just stopping for the day / carrying shovels and hammers, from that sloppily dressed / group of men.[61]

Xie Xiangnan's later works depart considerably from his earlier poems, becoming less explicit and direct. In *The History of Allergy* (*Guominshi* 过敏史, 2012), displacement, labor, and other themes reemerge, but within a markedly introspective mode of self-examination expressed through abstract and symbolic language. Such stylistic heterogeneity marks the work of other worker poets as well.

Damaged Bodies

The writings of Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 (b. 1980), one of the few female authors of contemporary workers' literature, are complex and diverse, ranging from quasi-ethnographic prose and poems to longer poetic compositions, with dense references to Chinese history and myth. They address the different scales of damage engendered by industrial development, from the pain that industrial machines inflict on female bodies to the depletion of resources caused by urbanization.[62] Zheng, who was born in Sichuan province in 1980, completed a nursing degree and worked locally for a few years. She left in 2001 to move to Dongguan, where she found employment in various factories and began publishing her poems in local newspapers and online. She has since been featured in prestigious literary journals and has released about a dozen collections, including *Huangmaling* (*Huangmaling*黄麻岭, 2006), which has been extensively translated, and a collection based on her conversations with coworkers entitled *Stories of Migrant Women Workers* (*Nügong ji* 女工记, 2012). Zheng's exceptional literary success has allowed her to cross social boundaries and professional spheres. Her appointment as full-time editor at a literary journal generated debate on whether she can still be called a *dagong* poet. Nonetheless, she continues to engage with workers and write about them.[63]

Iron is a central trope in Zheng's writing: in an essay titled "Iron" (Tie 铁, 2007), Zheng recounts the piercing pain she felt when a lathe scraped off one of her fingernails. When she was taken to the hospital, she found herself surrounded by wounded people, most of whom were migrant workers like herself. Zheng claims that this injury and the realization of a shared condition of

pain prompted her to write. According to critic Zhang Qinghua 张清华, the motif of iron expresses "the aesthetics of the industrial era," and Zheng's poetry should be credited with producing a "cold, hard, new aesthetics of iron."[64]

Zheng's poems convey the damage that the industrial regime inflicts on women's bodies and are said to inaugurate a new "late-modern chronotope of pain" in Chinese literature.[65] "Disassemble" (Chai 拆, 2009), offers a salient depiction of female bodies turned into things. The character *chai*, commonly translated as "demolish," is a notorious symbol of urban transformation—it was routinely painted on buildings slated for demolition and displayed in works by visual artists documenting the erasure of neighborhoods. In the poem's first eight verses, fluidly joined together through a series of enjambments, the material and immaterial belongings of the lyrical subject (her body, her past, her whole existence), are "disassembled" and reduced to what could be described as their antonyms: bones into screws, flesh into plastic, dreams into disappointments. No explicit subject enacts these transformations, which are part of a seemingly agentless process. But something abruptly changes midway. The lyrical "I" irrupts at the end of the eighth verse, ". . .But I / keep searching for the meaning of living in a life filled with rust." And in spite of all the tribulations depicted up to this point, the following verses offer an unexpected declaration of love for the very factory that "dissects people into parts":

> But I still love deeply this age, the industrial hardware factory / love its wheels, wings, the bearings of motor vehicles, / Love the clarity of pain it brings me, the happiness and misfortune.

Nonetheless, returning to a state of wholeness is impossible, and even her being transformed into a marketable commodity can fail. What was initially depicted as an agentless mechanism gives way, by the end of the poem, to the lyrical subject's own desire to forge herself into something sharp and durable—a nail, which perhaps stands for the word of the poet bearing witness:

> If nothing else works out, if these times classify me as substandard, I'll return to the furnace to forge myself / into shape, hack myself into a sharp nail / nailing myself to the wall of our era.[66]

Linguistically, Zheng's poems are characterized by repetitions and catachresis, and by a relative paucity of action verbs. In the poem "Language" (Yuyan 语言), for instance, which comprises seven stanzas of irregular length (two of which consist only of one broken line), the only verbs are those related to the semantic field of speaking. Here are the first three stanzas:

> I speak this sharp-edged, oiled language /of cast iron—the language of silent workers / a language of tightened screws the crimping and memories of iron sheets / a language like callouses fierce crying unlucky / hurting hungry language back pay of the machines' roar occupational diseases / language of severed fingers life's foundational language / in the dark place of unemployment / between the damp steel bars these sad languages //. . . I speak them softly // in the roar of the machines. A dark language. Language of sweat. Rusty language / like a young woman worker's helpless eyes or an injured male worker by the factory doors / their hurting language language of shivering bodies / language of denied compensation for injured fingers.[67]

The poem primarily consists of adjectival phrases depicting the poet's "sad languages" that grow out of sharp iron tools and truncated workers' limbs, combining hardness and softness, aggression and vulnerability in the only actions that the poet can undertake—expressing empathy and bearing witness. The poem conveys a claim of truthfulness rooted in shared experiences, legitimating the speaker and inviting readers to recognize that her language is their own.

Between Country and City

A domestic worker in Beijing, Fan Yusu 范雨素 (b. 1973–), has produced a notable amount of nonfiction and poetry, but she became an international sensation when her memoir "I Am Fan Yusu" (Wo shi Fan Yusu 我是范雨素) was published online in April 2017 and immediately went viral. Fan's memoir, hailed as a demonstration of what the internet and new media offer to aspiring subaltern writers, narrates her life story from childhood to the present. She sees migration from rural Hebei as a form of striving toward socioeconomic independence, despite the adversities she endured. In this sense, "I Am Fan Yusu" is a comprehensive survey of the plight of labor migrants, with a focus on the discrimination faced by migrant women who provide affective and reproductive labor, and on the children and the elderly they leave behind when they move to the city. Powerful in its message of female solidarity, Fan's writing also stands out for its refined style and imagery.[68] Her account concludes with a strong plea for new forms of solidarity among rural-urban migrant laborers in the inhospitable city:

> As the daughter of a strong rural woman, I was often bullied by people in the city. I would then think: do people bully others who are weaker to get some physiological pleasure? Or is it just how genes work? Since then, I have had this idea that I will pass on love and dignity to everyone I meet who is weaker than I am.[69]

Figure 4. Fan Yusu at Migrant Workers Home, a labor NGO on the outskirts of Beijing.

Being stuck between "a city where one cannot settle and a countryside where one can no longer return" is the result of the current system of access and exclusion, according to which migrants have only limited access to basic services in the cities (including healthcare and education), unless they manage to obtain an urban household registration, which is often impossible.[70] This system, initially conceived for reasons of mobility control, has led to the formation of a cheap and precarious labor force. Among the most successful fictional works of migrant worker literature denouncing its consequences are Zhang Weiming's 张伟明 short stories "Next Stop" (Xia yi zhan 下一站, 1989) and "That's Right, I Am a Migrant Worker" (Dui le, wo shi ge dagongzai 对了，我是打工仔, 1990); Lin Jian's 林坚 "City of Others" (Bieren de chengshi 别人的城市, 1990); and An Zi's 安子 autobiographical novel *Journey of My Youth: The True Story of a* Dagongmei *in Shenzhen* (*Qingchun yizhan: Shenzhen dagongmei xiezhen* 青春驿站—深圳打工妹写真, 1992), which all involve migrant laborers at the margins of urban society encountering various obstacles in their attempts to be emancipated.

Guo Jinniu 郭金牛 (b. 1966) portrays the feeling of social segregation and misrecognition:

> A person crossed a province, another province, another province / A person takes a train, then a truck, and then a black bus again / Next stop / The motherland has given me a temporary residence permit. / The motherland accepted my payment for the temporary residence permit.[71]

The poem ends with the suicide of a migrant worker, presumably found by the police without a residence permit, pointing at the most tragic potential outcome of the system for undocumented migrants. Arrests and police mistreatment were a reality until the abolition of the "custody and repatriation" system in 2003, following a tragic incident in which a migrant worker, Sun Zhigang 孙志刚, was killed by the police for failing to produce his ID. Nevertheless, migrants continue to experience dire conditions in cities, including forced evictions.

Guo resorts to the trope of death also to convey a twisted sense of "homecoming" in his signature poem "Going Home on Paper" (Zhishang huanxiang 纸上还乡), where a migrant can return home only for his own burial, after he has committed suicide in the workplace. Guo's poetic language is dominated by white, the color of mourning in China:

> All night autumn wind runs through Mother's pearly everlasting / His whited ashes, frail whites heading home on the train / he's unconcerned with rice white / pearly everlasting white / Mother's white / Frostfall's. / Such an enormous white buries a miniscule white / like Mother burying her daughter.[72]

Homesickness is almost ubiquitous in post-1978 workers' literature, often with much brighter tones than Guo's, and often accompanied by an idealization of rural life. Echoing earlier works of Chinese "native soil" fiction (*xiangtu wenxue* 乡土文学), contemporary worker literature frequently contrasts the alienation and atomization of urban life to the warmth and (supposed) sense of security afforded by the countryside—an "imaginary nostalgia" that can be read as a critique of the present.[73]

Activism and Social Impact

Denunciation of the maladies of society does not necessarily result in political activism. This is partly a consequence of the prevailing political climate that is intolerant of bottom-up organizing, but also the result of the depletion of class politics. There have been instances, however, where momentary connections have occurred. One of the most prominent recent cases is that of Mi Jiuping 米久平, a leading organizer of the protests carried out by workers of the Shenzhen-based Jasic Technology against the company's exploitative regulations. Protesting workers demanded the right to form a union and received considerable support from student groups, before being arrested and required to write a statement of repentance. Among the arrested, Mi Jiuping responded to the demand with a poem:

> I stand atop a hill, / seeing beyond the highest heavens, / the mountains crisp green, / the red sun rising. / I stand on the banks of a great river, / taking in the sight of the water, / the rolling waves / surging on endlessly. / I am a crane in a crowd of people, / I am silent beyond the outskirts, / I have lost family, love, and friendship, / I have lost all, / I have lost everything. / I will have family, love, and friendship, / I will have all, / I will have everything. / Not today, / but in the not-distant future, / I am not me, / I am with us.[74]

Mi Jiuping's poem intersperses typical tropes of the "political lyric" (the bird's eye view over the land, the red sun, surging waves) with a stress on the poetic "I" that echoes the emphasis on individualism in much of post-Mao poetry as well as early 20th-century "new poetry." Within contemporary worker poetry, the poem is peculiar (and particularly militant) not only because of its context, having been written in the actual course of struggle, but especially for envisioning a positive future to be realized through collective action.[75]

Key Questions and Links with the Past

A major dispute regarding *dagong* literature concerns its literary value, generally taking the shape of a contrast between social relevance and aesthetic value. *Dagong* literature is usually viewed as genuine self-representation by workers themselves, often in opposition to mainstream or elite (mis)representations, but its authenticity and social relevance are often seen as coming at the expense of aesthetic refinement.[76] Coarseness and plainness in style and imagery are considered necessary characteristics of a literature purporting to convey the experience of real life, but they have also led to its being seen more as social commentary than art.[77] Maghiel van Crevel relates this debate to "a kind of zero-sum thinking in which high social significance automatically means low aesthetic value—and potentially neutralizes the battler poets at the very moment of their recognition," further suggesting that "social significance and aesthetic value cannot be neatly disentangled."[78] Indeed, one of the contributions of post-1978 workers' literature lies precisely in its reopening old questions on the entanglements of art and politics, on the social value of literature, and on the responsibility of the writer—questions of what literature does and for whom, and of its fraught position within the hierarchies of power and within the market.[79]

The problematic relation between aesthetic experimentation, political commitment, and social identification has been variously addressed by 20th-century proletarian literature, and not only in China.[80] However, it reemerges in the early 21st century in a radically new light. Unlike previous forms of Chinese working-class literature, which were framed in the larger project of socialist transformation directed by the CCP, post-1978 workers' literature came about in a relatively bottom-up manner at a time characterized by the fragmentation of the proletariat in the context of a nominally working-class state. At that time, aesthetic concerns for style and form were subordinated to the mobilization of audiences toward national goals. By contrast, the diverse configurations of workers' literature in the context of China's transition to capitalism run counter to the prevailing depoliticization of everyday life pursued by the Chinese party-state since the early 1990s. The denunciation of the dark sides of China's modernization and a demand for recognition characterize post-1978 workers' literature as a counterhegemonic project, in contrast to the hegemonic position of workers' literature in the 1950s–1970s.

In the texts themselves, this shift is evident in the different representation of the worker's relationship with the machine. From tools to be cherished as the instruments of a labor that was perceived as glorious, the machine has now become a symbol of alienation and the epitome of dehumanization—not much different from how it first appeared in Lu Yin's 1921 story "Can You Sell your Soul?" In this respect, contemporary workers' writings resonate much more with the literature of the Republican era than with its socialist counterparts. Overall, pre-1978 workers' literature sparks little interest in most worker authors active after the 1980s. Rather, they draw

inspiration from popular culture (including rock and folk music) and avant-garde literature from China and elsewhere. Their higher degree of individuality and abstraction is another significant difference from earlier forms of workers' writing.

Discussion of the Literature

Charles Laughlin's *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* analyzes labor reportage from 1930s Shanghai, a genre also discussed in Rudolf Wagner's *Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose* and in a few articles.[81] Little is available in English on workers' literature from the socialist period, long dismissed as anemic propaganda. Julia C. Lin's *Modern Chinese Poetry: An Introduction* devotes two chapters to proletarian and workers' poetry. Chapter Six in Cai Xiang's *Revolution and Its Narratives: China's Literary and Cultural Imaginaries, 1949–1966*, offers an in-depth analysis of what he terms "narratives of working-class subjectivity," while Chen Xiaomei's "Worker-Peasant-Soldier Literature" includes discussions of worker-themed drama and films from the 1960s and 1970s.

A growing body of English-language scholarship on post-1980 workers' literature has emerged since 2010.[82] Wanning Sun's *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices* is a foundational study that investigates the cultural politics of a range of genres.[83] Amy Dooling's "Representing *Dagongmei*" examines representations of female workers at the intersection of gender, migration, and cultural expression.[84]

Complementing these cultural studies approaches, other articles explore migrant worker literature from a variety of literary perspectives. Heather Inwood was among the first to address post-1978 *dagong* poetry as a renewed form of public engagement and a revamp of the tradition of social responsibility of poets in China.[85] Maghiel van Crevel, who has proposed the term "battler poetry," examines the aesthetic, institutional, and personal factors shaping workers' poetry and the surrounding discourse.[86] Claudia Pozzana connects migrant worker poets with the "Misty Poets" (*menglong shiren*) from the turn of the 1980s, with whom they share "the concept of poetry as an independent intellectual space distant from the dominant culture and governmental discourse."[87] By contrast, Yun Li and Rong Rong's "A Middle-Class Misidentification: Self-Identification in the Autobiographical Poetry of Chinese Female Peasant Workers," argues that some of the writings by women authors reflect their delusional identification with the middle class.[88] Meanwhile, Federico Picerni examines a Beijing-based writing group to address worker authors' interactions within a social space and the aesthetic disputes surrounding their literary production.[89]

Workers' literature has also been explored as a terrain of intersections between environmental crisis and gendered labor exploitation, as exemplified by Haomin Gong and Justyna Jagućcik, both of whom focus on Zheng Xiaoqiong.[90] Xiaojing Zhou's *Migrant Ecologies: Zheng Xiaoqiong's Women Migrant Workers* bridges questions of gender, environmental degradation, and labor exploitation. Finally, a less explored connection is taken up by Hongwei Bao's chapters on Mu Cao, which highlight the labor background of a poet otherwise known for his queer themes.[91]

English-language translations of workers' poetry include Xu Lizhi's poems, collected by Lucas Klein; the *Iron Moon* anthology, translated by Eleanor Goodman; and Guo Jinniu's poems in the collection *A Massively Single Number*, translated by Brian Holton.[92]

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31. Cao Ming, *Shiji fengyun zhong bashe* (Trudging through a Turbulent Century) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1997), 147.

32. On the reception and transnational circulation of *The Motive Force*, see Nicolai Volland, *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945–1965* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 85–92. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová criticizes the novel for its poor artistic execution. See her *Selective Guide to Chinese Literature, 1900–1949: The Novel* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1988), 32.

33. A contrasting trope is that of workers destroying the machines or sabotaging the factories controlled by the Nationalists. See Cai, *Revolution and Its Narratives*, 312–313.

34. Volland, *Socialist Cosmopolitanism*, 75.

35. Lily Xiao Hong Lee, *Bibliographical Dictionary of Chinese Women*, Volume 2: *The Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2002), 35.

36. Cao, *Shiji fengyun zhong bashe*, 230.

37. Cao, *Shiji fengyun zhong bashe*, 231.

38. Li Yunde 李云德, for instance, went on to publish fiction on mining and became well known all over China. His novel *Seething Mountains* (*Feiteng de qunshan* 沸腾的群山, 1966) was translated into Japanese in 1972 and made into a movie in 1976. On the Anshan group, see Xie Baojie, "'Xinde wenxue liliang' de peiyang—yi shiqinian shiqi Cao Ming yu Anshan gongren zuozhe de chengzhang wei lie" (Nurturing the "Power of the New Literature"—the Case of Cao Ming and the Growth of the Anshan Worker Writers in the Seventeen Years), *Wenyi Lilun yu Piping* 2 (2018): 81–88.

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