

WRITING WORKERS IN POST-SOCIALIST CHINA: MIGRANT WORKER POETRY AND ITS NEW LEFT RECEPTION

RUIKUNZE 王瑞

Introduction

For the title of his preface to the anthology *My Poetry: A Canon of Contemporary Worker Poetry* 我的诗篇—当代工人诗典藏 (2015, hereafter *My Poetry*), the editor Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇 (1974–) quotes from a Chinese translation of Karl Marx’s text: “[A]nd therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he himself has created.”¹ Unconventionally using quotation marks in the title to indicate a direct quote from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (hereafter the *Paris Manuscripts*), Qin highlights his Marxist reading of the poetics and politics of worker poetry in post-socialist China.

With this quote Qin Xiaoyu also calls attention to the worker-poet’s double creation: economic and literary productions. As I discuss below, different groups of worker-poets have very different perceptions of the relation between these two forms of production: whereas worker-poets from state-owned enterprises generally identify with their work and workplace, migrant worker-poets rather describe their economic production with a keen sense of alienation. Workers from state-owned enterprises have a working-class consciousness that bears the distinct socioeconomic signature of socialist China, as a social class “formed within a short period [...] under a command state economy” in early 1950s China who used to enjoy (many still do) a package of “employment, housing, education, and medical care” coming with their urban household registration (*hukou* 户口), guaranteed by their “working units.”² Migrant workers, on the other hand, come from a world, in Maghiel van Crevel’s words, “not of the proletariat but of the precariat.”³ Often termed *nongmin gong* 农民工 (literally: peasant worker) in the Chinese language, they work for the boss (*dagong* 打工).⁴ Their poems, henceforth labeled as “*dagong* poetry,” easily bring to mind the young Marx’s words about estranged labor: “An immediate consequence of the fact that man is

1 Qin Xiaoyu 2015, 1: 在其所创造的世界中直观自身。The translation, as indicated several pages later by Qin, is cited from the Chinese version of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1844 年经济学哲学手稿), published in 1979 by Renmin chubanshe. See Qin Xiaoyu 2015, 9–10. For the English translation quoted here, see Marx 1961, 76.

2 Pun and Chan 2008, 78–79.

3 van Crevel 2017a.

4 van Crevel 2017a. According to Qin Xiaoyu, the term *nongmin gong* first appeared in the Chinese media in 1984. See Qin 2015, 42.

estranged from the product of his labour, his life-activity, from his species being is the *estrangement of man from man*.”⁵ There are several English translations of *dagong* poetry; in this paper I choose “migrant worker poetry” not only to differentiate the two groups of workers emerging at different historical periods of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) but also to anticipate a discussion of a poetry inseparable from its socioeconomic context.

In her research into the transformation of Chinese literary production at the turn of the twenty-first century, Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 (1968–) reveals that migrant workers are avid readers of literary works, especially those related to their own lives. *Foshan Literature and Art* 佛山文艺, a regional literary magazine in Guangdong province, publishes literary works by migrant workers and caters to their literary taste and aspirations. As Shao shows, it had achieved an impressive circulation of 400,000 copies per issue by the end of the 1990s and, even more striking, most copies were sold locally in the region of the Pearl River Delta to their target readers: millions of migrant workers.⁶ The autobiographical account of Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 (1980–), a female poet who was a migrant worker before she obtained a position as a professional editor in 2009 and became a member of the Writers Association in 2010,⁷ confirms the impact of such literary magazines on the migrant worker. Zheng recalls, in an essay published in an unofficial poetry journal,⁸ how she, in order to evade the checkup of temporary residence permits, which she did not have (once discovered she could be forced back to the province of her household registration), spent nights locked up in her friend’s tiny rented apartment reading old literary magazines.⁹ Other publications by migrant workers appeared in unofficial poetry journals or company internal journals as well as materials circulated at poetry recitals. Since 2000 the Internet has facilitated the circulation of poems by migrant workers. Various forms of social media have helped to form poetic communities and increased group consciousness.¹⁰

Migrant worker poetry started to receive critical attention in the 2000s and became visible in China’s media in the 2010s through the promotion of New Left intellectuals and the support of local governments, such as that of Guangdong province.¹¹ The New Left

5 Marx 1961, 76–77. Original italics.

6 Shao Yanjun 2003, 62–64. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotations from Chinese sources are my own.

7 van Crevel 2017b, 255.

8 Unofficial publications in China refer to those without the book number issued by the state. Therefore they – for example, unofficial poetry journals – are not for sale and often circulate among specific groups.

9 Zheng 2014, 145.

10 van Crevel 2017a.

11 As van Crevel points out, the Chinese state plays a complex role in migrant worker culture, “sponsoring as well as censoring and supportive as well as repressive.” See van Crevel 2019, 130.

emerged in contemporary China from the intellectual debate over the issue of balanced and sustainable development in the late 1990s.¹² Concerned with social injustice, capital and power, democracy, and modernity, New Left intellectuals criticize global capitalism as well as “the neoliberal advocates of a free market, Western liberal democracy, and political reform” in order to search for a Chinese model of development.¹³ Given the diversity of New Left ideas and practices, Wang Ban and Jie Lu propose to go beyond intellectual history to define and understand China’s New Left in terms of New Left-spirited interventions – “as a broad social movement that includes intellectuals, factory workers, migrant workers, peasants, volunteers, and artists.”¹⁴ Whereas this suggestion of examining New Left interventions in various social and cultural contexts is inspiring, this too general definition of the New Left may conceal the differences and even the contradictions in various kinds of interventions.

In this paper I limit my use of “New Left” to the field of intellectual, especially literary, debate. In their survey of the development of the Chinese New Left as a school of thought since 2000, Shi et al. (2018) observe a common “statist turn” in the works of four leading New Left scholars – Wang Shaoguang, Cui Zhiyuan, Wang Hui, and Gan Yang. They summarize these scholars’ similarity as “commitment to criticizing capitalism in its latest forms and defending the positive legacy of Chinese socialism, especially Maoism.”¹⁵ New Left literary criticism, as I show in the second section, draws upon a wide spectrum of leftist theoretical resources ranging from Marxism, Western neo-Marxism, and Sinicized Marxist-Leninism to the intellectual ideas of the Chinese New Left to address economic, social, and cultural inequalities within China in the larger contexts of neoliberal capitalism and globalization. New Left literary critics such as Qin Xiaoyu, Li Yunlei 李云雷 (1976–), and Zhang Huiyu 张慧瑜 (1980–) attach much social importance to worker poetry in post-socialist China. In his trailblazing research on migrant worker poetry, Maghiel van Crevel suggests that studies should be conducted on transformations of the politically charged persona of “the worker” and their relation to cultural production.¹⁶ While this paper does not address this research question directly, it explores one aspect of it, namely, the interactions and gaps between New Left literary critics’ expectation of writing workers and worker-poets’ literary practices in the contexts of globalization and post-socialism.

12 The term “Chinese New Left” 中国新左派 appeared first in 1994. See Shi, Lachapelle, and Galway (2018), 155, footnote 1.

13 Wang and Lu 2012, ix.

14 Wang and Lu 2012, xii.

15 Shi, Lachapelle, and Galway (2018), 154.

16 van Crevel 2017b, 276.

The first section discusses the (re)introduction of the *Paris Manuscripts* as part of Marxist canon in 1980s China, which legitimized the notions of “human nature” and “humanism” as well as “alienation” as aesthetic principles of literary modernism. This made it possible to talk about the critical function of literature, and on a different level, the acknowledgment of (universal) human nature also paved the way to building the desiring subject in post-socialist China, who feels “the need to embrace wide-ranging ‘desires,’ from consumption to work to sex” as “life-enhancing practices.”¹⁷ The second section surveys New Left literary reception of worker poetry, which criticizes consumption-based global capitalism, and relatedly, responds critically to the literary tradition established in the 1980s that tapped into Euro-American literary modernism for literary resources and standards. The critical positions taken by these essays range from calling for a leftist literary criticism to understand the worker’s role in China’s modernity to reactivating Mao Zedong’s 1942 “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art” (hereafter the Talk) in order to build the consciousness of a new working class as part of “the people.” Interestingly, the notion of “alienation” is cited, if at all, in these essays strictly in terms of young Marxism, while its development in Chinese literary studies in relation to Marxist humanism is often ignored. In the third and last section, I offer a textual analysis of selected poems, which explores the writing of “alienation” in migrant worker poetry as an array of phenomenal experiences. This analysis also considers the role of desire and the desiring subject in shaping such experiences.

1 Alienation, Desire, and the Aesthetic Subjectivity

Scholars agree that the Marxist notion of “alienation” bears the influence of G. W. F. Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach. In Hegel’s speculative conception of man, alienation refers to the separation of the subject from itself; while Feuerbach grasps alienation in the relation between man and religion “as the domination of a subject by an estranged object of its own creation.”¹⁸ Marx repositioned “alienation” in the non-transcendent context of capitalist economic production of the nineteenth century, disclosing the impact of the division of labor on industrial workers in terms of his social relations and world experience, that is, his relation to his product, his laboring activity, to other human beings, and to nature and his human identity. In the twentieth century, “alienation” has developed into an idiom in psychology, sociology, and literary and cultural studies, which is closely related to the subjective senses of dislocation, fragmentation, lack of freedom, and ultimately, dehumanization.

17 Rofel 2007, 4.

18 Thompson 1979, 24–25.

The *Paris Manuscripts* was translated into Chinese first by He Sijing 何思敬 (1896–1968) in 1956. The term “alienation” was translated as *yihua* 异化, *waihua* 外化, *waizaihua* 外在化, and *shuyuanhua* 疏远化 and “estranged labor” as *shuyuanhua de laodong* 疏远化的劳动. The discussion of this notion was silenced in 1963 by Zhou Yang 周扬 (1907–1989), the head of the propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party at the time, when he criticized the use of the notion to propagate eternal human nature, which ran contradictory to class analysis, and to suggest the frustrated pan-human needs for freedom in the political, economic, and ideological fields in communist society. Donald J. Munro differentiated, in his 1974 essay, the interpretations of “estranged labor” in the Chinese and Euro-American contexts: the Chinese term refers to “the objective fact that goods produced by a worker can become things separate from the worker and in control of him”; while European philosophers such as Erich Fromm approach it rather as the worker’s phenomenal experience, which Munro himself endorsed when he wrote: “Marx’s own objection to the division of labour concentrated primarily on its psychic damage. It prevents people from expressing their individuality in the manner most akin to that of an artist.”¹⁹

In the early reform era of the PRC the notion of “alienation” entered the aesthetic arena. Alluding to the *Paris Manuscripts*, the philosopher Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897–1986) recuperated “human nature” 人性论 and “humanism” 人道主义 by drawing their connections to Marxism and proceeded to argue for more creative freedom of writing “round characters” and antiheroes in literature.²⁰ The high-ranking cultural cadre Wang Ruoshui 王若水 (1926–2002) famously raised the theoretical issue of socialist alienation, which manifested itself in the ideological, political, and economic arenas.²¹ Like Zhu, Wang drew upon the *Paris Manuscripts* to affirm the central position of “the man” 人 in intellectual debates, and his taking of “alienation” further legitimized literature’s critical and protesting functions. In the mid-1980s, literary critic Liu Zaifu 刘再复 (1941–) published the influential essay “On the Subjectivity of Literature” 论文学的主体性, building on the theories of Zhu and Wang to develop a theory of the aesthetic subjectivity. For Liu, not only the subjectivity of literary characters but also that of authors and critics/readers should be taken into account.²² Wang Ruoshui responded to Liu’s theorization by reiterating the importance of including “alienation” in the aesthetic subjectivity.²³ These essays opened up discussions in the literary field about alienation and the

19 Munro 1974, 581–582.

20 Zhu 1979.

21 Wang 1980.

22 Liu 1985, 1986.

23 Wang 1988.

self in relation to modernization and modernity. They made it possible to explore “alienation” as the phenomenal experience of the modern man.

The acceptance of the universal human nature in the 1980s went beyond intellectual debates and has exerted far-reaching impacts on Chinese society: as Lisa Rofel argues, it has legitimized desires, broadly defined as “a wide range of aspirations, needs, and longings.”²⁴ Writing in 2007 Rofel argued that desire “is a key cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a post-socialist world” and the desiring subject functions variously as a trope, a normative ideal, and a horizon of possibility – or impossibility.²⁵ Seeing that post-socialist reform led to new forms of class inequality and rural/urban division continued to exist, Rofel remained skeptical about the portrayal of post-socialist reforms as “setting human nature free” and questioned that the desiring subject “promises new freedoms.”²⁶ The next two sections take Rofel’s insights as a point of departure: both New Left intellectuals and migrant worker-poets would respond critically to the inequalities and lack of freedom appearing together with globalization and China’s post-socialist reform, but in very different ways; it is notable that the desiring subject plays a role in the writing of “alienation” in migrant worker poetry – as a normative ideal and a horizon of possibility, but also as a psychological defense mechanism.

2 New Left Reception of Worker Poetry

Explicitly or implicitly evoking writings from Marx, neo-Marxist criticisms of consumerism and global capitalism, and even Maoist anti-intellectual parole, New Left critics use worker poetry as an example to criticize the power relations in global capitalism – in both economic and cultural senses – and in China’s literary establishment. Their renaming the “migrant worker” as the “new worker” is an attempt to recast the worker as a new (leftist) social class, yet this identity politics can be seriously flawed, because it conceals, first of all, the profound social, economic, and cultural inequalities between the migrant worker and the worker of state-owned enterprises.

Migrant Worker as the New Worker?

Zhang Xudong borrows Ernst Bloch’s term “synchronic non-contemporaneity” to describe “the rise of an extremely uneven and heterogeneous socioeconomic, political, and daily reality” in post-socialist China.²⁷ This point cannot be more manifested than in the

24 Rofel 2007, 3.

25 Rofel 2007, 3, 6.

26 Rofel 2007, 5, 6, 12.

27 Zhang Xudong 2008, 17.

coexistence of two groups of industrial workers in China, whose experiences of their work and workplaces are drastically different. In the 1990s tens of millions of state-owned enterprise workers were laid off, while at the same time hundreds of millions of peasants left their villages to work in factories and cities. Despite their different historical experiences, Zhang Huiyu, a cultural critic and professor at Peking University who mentors the literature group of the Migrant Workers Home 工友之家 located in Picun at the fringe of Beijing,²⁸ argues in a 2015 essay that they form the two sides of the economic reform facilitating China's integration into global capitalism and economic neoliberalism. In this sense, Zhang calls the former "old workers" and the latter "new workers." Resonating with Karl Marx's theory of estranged labor, Zhang maintains that the worker is not just a "working" person, but also "man" and "human species." Consequently he proposes to see worker poetry as a way to understand the modern man emerging from industrial civilization.²⁹

Such an undifferentiated approach to the identity of the worker-poet as part of the grand narrative of modernity tends to conceal the inequalities suffered by migrant workers as the result of the binary city-country structure, a socioeconomic legacy from socialist China. As part of his multimedia packaging of *My Poetry*, which included the publication of the book and an English translation of selected poems,³⁰ a documentary film, poetry recitations, conferences, poetry prizes, and various web-based activities, Qin Xiaoyu organized on February 2, 2015 a full-day program on worker poetry in Beijing, "with speeches by the poets in the morning program, an academic symposium in the afternoon and a poetry recital in the evening."³¹ Both "old" and "new" worker-poets were invited to the events under the same label of "the worker." Zheng Xiaoqiong, who is mentioned above, bluntly stated that it is wrong and absurd to put migrant workers into the category of "the worker" because they are essentially peasants who have no access to the many rights of the worker with an urban household registration.³² Zheng's words reveal the suspended identity of the migrant worker in post-socialist China.

Tian Xiaoyin's 田晓隐 (Tian Shengjian 田升剑, 1985-) poem "I Use Screws to Fix and Question China's Failings" 我用钉子螺丝悬疑中国短板 articulates this suspension, that is, the difficulty of naming and socially locating the migrant worker: the lyrical "I" used to think himself to be "a qualified Chinese farmer 合格的中国农民," but then "the wind changed direction 风一拐" and he had to go south; he finds then that "I'm not a state-

28 More on the literature group and migrant worker poetry, see van Crevel 2019.

29 Zhang Huiyu 2015, 96.

30 Eleanor Goodman's *Iron Moon* (2016) is the first and so far the most important translation of migrant worker poetry. I cite her translation – sometimes with adjustment – in this paper.

31 van Crevel 2017b, 265.

32 Qin 2015, 417–419.

owned enterprise worker, and I'm not a farmer / my status is that of a man held in suspense" 我不是国家工人,也不是农民/我以一个悬疑者的身份。The same applies to his act of writing: "I define myself as: a poet in suspense" 我把自己定义为: 悬疑诗人。³³ Thus the speaking subject "I" experiences the double suspension, first in his socioeconomic status – between the farmer and the worker – and then in his cultural status – between the poet and the migrant worker.

In contrast Tian Li 田力 (1962–), whose poems are also included in the anthology *My Poetry*, has never had such identity issues. As the third generation in his family working in the Anshan Steel and Iron Company (*Angang* 鞍钢, or AnSteel) in northeastern China, Tian is quite certain that he is an AnSteel worker who writes about the worker and AnSteel. Hailed as the "eldest son of the (People's) Republic," AnSteel had played a predominant role in China's socialist industrialization and used to be a sprawling state-owned enterprise equipped with its own schools, hospitals, and cultural facilities. Having spent almost his whole life there, Tian Li's identification with AnSteel has not changed even when it declined in the post-socialist era:

This is a photo taken on the afternoon of my father's birthday
I took him out in his wheelchair to a roadside barber
AnSteel
is the eldest son of the (People's) Republic
And I
am the eldest son of this little old man
I take him out
This is what I should do
and this is all natural.³⁴

Tian Li recited this short poem "On a Photo" 题一张照片 in a CCTV (China Central Television) report on worker poetry on May 1, the Labor's Day, of 2015. The lyrical voice describes an affectionate father-son moment on the father's birthday captured by a photo. By drawing a parallel between the relation of AnSteel to the PRC and his own father-son relation, the lyrical voice moves the portrayal of filial duty out of the familial context to express the two generations' family-like loyalty and attachment to their workplace, which the speaking subject considers "all natural." The profound bonds that Tian Li's speaking

33 Qin 2015, 350–351. For the English translation see Goodman 2016, 189, with adjustment.

34 这一张是父亲过生日的下午 / 我推着他去路边的 / 小理发摊儿 / 鞍钢 / 是共和国的长子 / 而我 / 是这个老头的长子 / 我推着他 / 应该应份 / 天经地义。CCTV-1, "Worker Poetry. Tian Li: Labor is a beautiful poem," CCTV, May 1, 2015, <http://tv.cctv.com/2015/05/01/VIDE1430479617249253.shtml>.

subject feels toward his workplace and labor, full of individualized details yet inevitably disciplined by the state ideology,³⁵ hardly appear in migrant worker poetry.

In Qin Xiaoyu's view, migrant workers born in the 1960s and 1970s, as shown in their poems portraying their tragic circumstances, tend to be atomized individuals; while the younger generations have developed a strong sense of social identity with political consciousness and agency. They tend to question social inequalities and demand more freedom and individual development; they are more rebellious against authoritarian management and less tolerant of estranged labor. Citing E. P. Thompson, Qin argues that migrant worker poetry can turn out to be a cultural indicator of a new social class in the making.³⁶ For this reason many New Left literary critics propose to rename *dagong* poetry "new workers poetry."

The poems analyzed in the third section will put into question Qin's claim about generational differences and collective consciousness, but some migrant worker artists do welcome the term "the new worker." Sun Heng 孙恒 (1973?-), founder of the New Workers Art Troupe 新工人艺术团 based in Picun, claimed in a 2013 workshop that "the new worker" as a social group is in a state of becoming. Their art intended to get workers' voices heard, their living circumstances seen and, not least, to develop a class-consciousness 阶级意识.³⁷ Zhang Huiyu encouraged the group's use of first-person pronouns such as "I" or "we" in their artistic creation, believing that it helps to resist the othering "they/them" used in "mainstream culture" 主流文化, which leads to the social marginalization of migrant workers.³⁸ Similarly, the unofficial poetry journal *Worker Poetry* (*gongren shige* 工人诗歌, 2007–2009) edited by Shengzi 绳子 (Xu Zhengxian 许正先, 1968–) and Wu Ji 吴季 also intended to develop a collective consciousness of the worker by looking for literary works "thought out and created self-consciously from the perspective of the laborer." Such literature should offer an antidote to the "commercialization, snobbery, and elitism of (petit-)bourgeois literature."³⁹

Against Global Capitalism and Literary Elitism

As early as 2002 a symposium was held in Sichuan, aiming to address the marginalization of Marxism and "the people" in the context of a post-Cold War globalization, in which Western liberal democracy was promoted and the victory of Western capitalism after the

35 Qin 2015, 28.

36 Qin 2015, 62–63.

37 Cui et al. 2013, 68, 69, 75. It should be noted that the art group was called Young Migrant Workers Art Group 打工青年艺术团 on its foundation in 2002.

38 Cui et al. 2013, 73.

39 Gongren shige lianmeng 2009.

Cold War was proclaimed the end of history. Against this political-economic situation, the symposium intended to foreground “the people’s aesthetics” 人民美学, which reconnects with those who are on the production side of global capitalism. The participants agreed that Mao’s Talk is a major contribution to “the people’s aesthetics.”⁴⁰

Feng Xianguang 冯宪光 (1945–), a participant of the symposium who is a specialist in Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, interprets “the people’s aesthetics” as a critique of Chinese intellectual enlightenment in the 1980s. He castigates theoreticians such as Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930–) and Zhu Guangqian for introducing Eurocentric modernity as universal in their works on aesthetics, which, as Feng sees it, ended up promoting cultural colonialism. Mao Zedong’s Talk, on the other hand, has established the people as “the aesthetic subject” 审美主体 and thereby makes possible the theorization of “the people’s aesthetics.”⁴¹ Referring to Terry Eagleton on Marxism but actually citing Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* (without indicating the source) as saying that every laborer can obtain their intellectual development freely, Feng calls for replacing intellectual elites with “the people” as the aesthetic subject. What appears very strange in Feng’s criticism of aesthetics studies in the 1980s is that he completely leaves out Wang Ruoshui’s discussion on socialist alienation.

Several articles published in the major literary journal *Debates in Literature and Art* 文艺争鸣 in 2005 regard “subaltern subsistence writing” 底层生存/生活写作, in particular, migrant worker poetry, as a literary representation of the character of the people 人民性 and its historical authenticity and Chinese identity. Meng Fanhua 孟繁华 (1951–), on the other hand, attributes the marginalization of workers, peasants, and other subaltern groups to consumerism and what he calls “middle-class culture” 中产文化. As he sees it, the cultural politics and ideology of the market is dominating culture and literature in the world, worsening the uneven global cultural order. He praises the authenticity and courage of “subaltern writing” 底层生活的写作 to confront real suffering.⁴² Zhang Qinghua 张清华 (1963–), a university professor of literature and a prolific critic advocating avant-garde poetry, brings together the ethical aspect of migrant worker poetry and its representation of the character of the people 人民性. Regarding it as a form of “subaltern subsistence writing” 底层生存写作, Zhang interprets its poetics as emerging from the (tragic) conflict between the individual and history, where the individual migrant worker succumbs to “the irresistible fate” of post-socialist transformation – hence his/her tragedy.

40 Wen 2002.

41 Qin Xiaoyu seems to share Feng’s view of Mao’s Talk, which he sees as affirming the creativity potential of common people. However, Qin also points out that Mao’s Talk as *the* dominant cultural tenet in China had heavily intervened in literary creation. See Qin 2015, 6–7.

42 Meng 2005.

Zhang states that the “ethics of writing in our time” should be “anti-history,” that is, to record those tragedies of “subaltern subsistence.” Zhang condemns the “middle-class taste” as narcissistic and hypocritical, but neither does he believe that “true common people” have the “possibility and condition to write.” In the end he pins the hope of representing the common people on intellectuals who are sympathetic and empathetic with their experience.⁴³

Thus “the people’s aesthetics” can be viewed as a leftist reaction to the socioeconomic and cultural reality of twenty-first century China in a globalized world. They offer critiques of and reflections on the following issues: the complacency of intellectual elites’ cultural project of enlightenment in the 1980s, which drew heavily upon Western theoretical resources as cultural capital; the social stratification and inequality brought about by China’s economic reform since the 1990s; and the homogenizing power of global consumerist culture manifested in what they perceive as middle-class taste or culture. These New Left literary theorists then recuperate the Maoist-Leninist construction of “the people” as the aesthetic subject to resist against global capitalism and literary elitism, assuming that their unprivileged socioeconomic status automatically endows their writing with (moralized) historical authenticity rooted in its Chineseness.

For Liu Dongwu 柳冬妩 (1973–), a critic who was a migrant worker-poet himself, two kinds of elites have caused the marginalization of the migrant worker in social life and migrant worker-poets in literary scenes: (neo)liberal economists who choose to overlook the sufferings of the common people in China’s socioeconomic transformations; and literary critics who exercise their “discursive hegemony” over migrant worker-poets. Upholding humanism as the basic principle, Liu considers the literary elites’ obsession with techniques as “poetically reactionary” 反动. He stresses the position of the migrant worker-poet as the aesthetic subject, who has not only viscerally experienced radical changes but also written about these changes. These poets, Liu declares, “insert themselves between the text and history.”⁴⁴ The historical authenticity of migrant workers’ writings is recognized by Zhang Weimin 张未民 as its Chineseness, because the authors are “common people” and their works are close to their existential truth and existence “scenes,” which are real life in China.⁴⁵ Given the fact that Zhang was the editor in chief of *Debates in Literature and the Arts* and a cultural cadre in Jilin province, his attack on intellectuals for “self-elitification” 自我精英化 and for “refusing to reform themselves” 拒绝改造, which resonates strongly with the Maoist view of literature,⁴⁶ seems particularly alarming.

43 Zhang Qinghua 2005.

44 Liu 2005, 34.

45 Zhang Weimin 2005.

46 van Crevel 2017b, 272.

Theorizing a “New Worker Aesthetics”

Whereas it seems self-evident that “new worker poetry” should be examined in the global context of labor literature as well as Chinese new urban literature,⁴⁷ the New Left critic Li Yunlei, who serves as editor of China’s prominent official literary journals *Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art* 文艺理论与批评 and *Literary Gazette* 文艺报, moves further to theorize a “new worker aesthetics” 新工人美学 in a 2014 essay. In it Li praises the New Workers Art Troupe for their keen class consciousness and their aesthetic works as “a way of organizing life and a form of spiritual life.”⁴⁸ He considers their cultural practices as meaningful in searching for a breakthrough in a society of consumerism and atomized individuals. Li, furthermore, believes that their cultural practices challenge the established aesthetic standards that feature elitism, modernism, and foreignness. He then calls for setting up a new set of evaluative principles by combining the established standards with “the people’s aesthetics” developed between the 1940s and 1970s, that is, he tries explicitly to salvage the Maoist-Leninist legacy to examine migrant worker culture. Together with the new workers’ cultural practices, a “new worker aesthetics” should emerge.⁴⁹ Li’s theorization is sketchy, but it is an endeavor ambitious enough to reestablish a leftist literary tradition through the cultural production of migrant workers.

By (selectively) foregrounding the voices of the worker, whose labor is a fundamental part of global capitalism and Chinese economic life, as the aesthetic subject with historical and literary authenticity, New Left critics attack capitalism, consumerism, and not least, intellectual and economic elites. Although they often take a stance against the so-called “mainstream media,” the New Left’s championing of Marxism, however, is not as rebellious or critical as it is for their Western peers, because the PRC still upholds socialism as the state ideology, which has been increasingly strengthened under Xi Jinping’s regime.

In their attack on intellectuals, furthermore, these critics seem to forget that they themselves are also elites enjoying high social status and with cultural and financial resources at their disposal. Qian Wenliang 钱文亮 (1965–) criticizes Zhang Qinghua’s arbitrary use and hence unfair attack on the so-called “middle class” by pointing out Zhang’s thoughtless transplantation of the notion from Western sources into the Chinese context. Qian further warns against overusing identity theories to analyze poetic works, which tend to eliminate their complexities. Instead Qian advocates establishing a theoretical framework bearing an understanding of the paradox and legitimacy crisis of modernity.⁵⁰

47 Hou 2009, 23–24.

48 Li 2014, 21.

49 Li 2014.

50 Qian 2007.

In their discussion on worker poetry as “subaltern subsistence writing,” New Left literary critics have left out the inconvenient issue of alienation. The reinterpretation of “alienation” in relation to humanism and the aesthetic subjectivity in the 1980s is seldom mentioned in their arguments, nor is “alienation” treated as a major theme of literary modernism – not to mention its gendered variation in worker poetry. Below I look into the writing of alienation in migrant worker poetry from four interrelated aspects – production, consumption, time, place – in order to demonstrate that these poems are highly diverse and ambiguous literary products. Their articulations of the excruciating experiences of alienation through highly individualized lyrical voices do deliver a harsh critique of global capitalism, but they are also poetic works whose ambivalences and complexities deserve a much more nuanced analysis than New Left criticism has done so far.

3 Poetics and Politics of Alienation in Migrant Worker Poetry

Production: Alienated from the Body

New Left literary criticism has, to a large extent and rightly, focused on the writing of production in migrant worker poetry to disclose the side of global capitalism that is often concealed by glamorous consumption. This subsection intends to show how production is depicted through the worker-narrator’s various experiences of alienation from his/her body.

As the term “migrant worker” indicates, these workers move – geographically and socially – from one place to another. Xie Xiangnan 谢湘南 (1974–) describes a rural youth “I” arriving in Guangzhou:

and in March 1996, I was ...
 unloaded from the train by the flow of people, like a log
 just pulled out of the forest. The earth and sky had already changed

“Guangzhou Train Station, March 1996” 1996年3月的广州火车站⁵¹

The word *xie* 卸 (unload) suggests that the train was so crowded that the passenger was pushed off like a piece of cargo. In addition to the narrator’s loss of control over his own body, he experiences a sense of dislocation and disorientation in the chaotic train station of Guangzhou, the gateway to the Pearl River Delta, where the major part of the World’s Factory is located.

51 Qin 2015, 230. The original: 1996年3月我... / 被人流从火车上卸下来, 像从森林中抽出来的 / 一块木头. 天空和土地都已改变. English translation based on Goodman 2016, 83, with adjustment.

Most migrant worker-poets are blue-collar workers, therefore the writing of the body – or the lack thereof – stands out in their poetry. The individual human body often disappears into an abstract set of numbers or into industrial machinery. Sun Haitao 孙海涛 (1978–) writes in his short poem “Employment ID” 工卡: “for a decade, without a name and position / a man shrinks to four Arabic numerals / to be ordered around in the workshop,”⁵² while Tang Yihong 唐以洪 (1970–), who works in a shoe factory, finds himself named after the machine he operates:

I have lost my name
I am Tang Yihong
but they call me the heel seat lasting machine
same as the name of the machine
together with that machine
I work non-stop

“Looking for That Leg Which Accompanies Me Home” 寻找那条陪我回乡的腿⁵³

Both poems describe how the narrator has lost his/her body and been turned into “things” at their workplaces. Zheng Xiaoqiong writes a similar dehumanizing process in two steps. First, the speaking subject sells her/his body off to the factory:

You don't know, my name has disappeared into an employee ID
my two hands have become part of the assembly line, my body was signed over
to a contact ...

After her body disappears into the factory, an uncanny fragmentation of the self takes place while s/he is working:

... I see the silent fluorescent lights
fling the exhausted shadow on the machine station, it moves slowly
turning, bending down, silent as a cast iron.

“Life” 生活⁵⁴

52 Goodman 2016, 93, with adjustment. The original in Qin 2015, 243: 十年, 省略了名字和职务 / 一个人浓缩成四个阿拉伯数字 / 在车间被呼来唤去。

53 Qin 2015, 185. The original: 我把我的名字 / 弄丢了, 我叫唐以洪 / 他们却叫我后帮机 / 和那台机器同名 / 和那台机器一起 / 不停地运转。

54 Qin 2015, 267. English translation based on Goodman 2016, 112, with adjustment. The original: 你们不知道, 我的姓名隐进了一张工卡里 / 我的双手成为流水线的一部分, 身体签给了 / 合同, ... / ... 我透过寂静的白炽灯光 / 看见疲倦的影子投影在机台上, 它慢慢地移动 / 转身, 弓下来, 沉默如一块铸铁。

When the fluorescent lights – an recurring image in migrant worker poetry almost invariably associated with working overtime – throw the speaker’s shadow on the machine, the narrating subject adopts an external perspective, detaching from his/her own shadow by observing how the latter toils. This description of self-fragmentation visualizes the Marxist notion of alienation in its sense of *Entäußern*, that is, the lyrical “I” is deprived of the ownership of his/herself in the workplace.

The shadows under the fluorescent lights in Ji Zhishui’s 寂之水 (Liu Lihua 刘丽华, 1984–) poem “Deaf Women Workers” 聋哑女工, on the other hand, appear as a collective picture of silence:

In the rusty night lit by fluorescent lights
their shadows fall on the machines’
concave parts, pinned motionless there
when I walk close to them, their shadows softly fall upon me
as though their weight has been taken by the huge machines, along with their sound
empty, nothing can fill⁵⁵

If Zheng’s poem projects the subjective feelings of exhaustion and silence of the lyrical “I” on her/his separated shadow, then the speaking subject here sees how the fate of deaf women workers gets stuck in the machine, “pinned motionless there.” The weightlessness and silence of their shadows are metaphors for their insignificance and lack of voice to speak for themselves, which the not-deaf speaking subject comes to share, as implied by her/his act of emerging into their shadows. This sharing of fate, however, does not create any camaraderie or solidarity among the workers.

Many poems confront directly the loss of the body with images of mutilation or sickness. They not only disclose brutal working conditions but also embody – how ironic – the estranging and dehumanizing relation between the worker and their labor. When telling the “Story of Niu Er” 牛二记, who is the narrator’s colleague in the coalmine, poet Chen Nianxi 陈年喜 (1970–) describes Niu Er’s efforts to change his fate with all his might: “spearheading [his way] with his sweat, resorting to his own blood.”⁵⁶ And in the end he achieved “his mother’s eight years’ survival / and his younger brother’s ten-year

55 Qin 2015, 335. English translation based on Goodman 2016, 174, with adjustment. The original: 在被白炽灯照亮的, 锈迹斑驳的夜晚 / 她们的影子落在机台上 / 凹进去的部分, 被卡着无法动弹 / 我走近她们时, 它们柔软地落在我的身上 / 似乎被巨大的机器抽走了重量, 抽走了声响 / 空荡荡的, 什么也无法填补。

56 Qin 2015, 197. The original: 以汗为先锋 以血为后盾。

dream of [college] study / at the cost of two fingers and a rib.”⁵⁷ Zheng Xiaoqiong offers a gendered writing of sickness within the body:

Time opens its enormous maw the moon over the machine
 rusting tired darkened turbid its inner danger
 gurgles past the cliff of the body collapses into mud and splintered stones
 the splinters of time turbulent waters fill a woman's body
 wild tidal waters no long fluctuating with the seasons ...

“Woman Worker: Youth Pinned to a Station” 女工: 被固定在卡座上的青春⁵⁸

The moon is a salient symbol of time and history, intimate longings, and nostalgia in classical Chinese poetry. In migrant worker poetry, however, it often indicates, like the fluorescent lights, working overtime. The phrase “the moon over the machine” brings together both associations: the moon functions as the temporal indicator of the female worker's menstruation – and by extension, her health and fertility; and it also suggests that the speaking subject is working overtime. The second line transposes the feelings of the woman worker about her body into the moon: “tired, darkened, turbid.” And the natural images in the next lines form a picture of commotion and turbulence, visualizing chaotic time and implying the irregular menstruation within the female body, caused by constant overwork and often accompanied by the moon.

The ultimate loss of one's body is death, as exemplified in Xu Lizhi's 许立志 (1990–2014) short poem “A Screw Plunges to the Ground” 一颗螺丝掉在地上. The screw is a familiar metaphor in socialist China: it is the symbol of the selfless individual who is willing to serve the larger, collective cause of communism. Xu recontextualizes the screw in the post-socialist factory – and thus creates a strong sense of irony – which serves economic globalization with no chance of keeping his/her individual self:

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 ground⁵⁹

57 Qin 2015, 197. The original: 以两根手指一条肋骨的代价 / 换得母亲八年的残喘 / 弟弟十年的举人梦。

58 Goodman 2016, 124, with adjustment. The original in Qin 2015, 276–277: 时间张开巨大的喙 明月在机台 / 生锈 它疲倦 发暗 混浊 内心的凶险 / 汨汨流动 身体的峭壁崩溃 泥土与碎石 / 时间的碎片 塞满女性体内汹涌的河流 / 混乱的潮水不跟随季节涨落。

The act of plunging to the ground is mentioned in the first and last line, establishing a parallel between the screw and the worker. Both, furthermore, fall on a night of working overtime, implying a situation of being overused and ceasing to function. If the screw is an insignificant part that can be disposed of and replaced, what about the overused man? The fall of a person easily brings to mind the series of suicides of young workers of Foxconn between 2010 and 2011 in Shenzhen, the world's largest contract electronics manufacturer providing products for major international brands. Most of these young people chose to jump off from high buildings. Xu jumped to his death in 2014. Although it is not confirmed that his death was directly related to his experience of working at Foxconn, poems like this one certainly show the psychic damage the poet suffered as the result of grueling working conditions.

The comparison of the human being to the screw, articulated in an almost emotionless, numb tone, foregrounds the widespread instrumentalization of the worker's body at the workplace. Leaving out the human features of the worker – his feelings, his physical and psychological suffering – this poem discloses the worker's relation to his work and workplace as ultimately dehumanizing and therefore exhibits "alienation" in its classical Marxist sense. Last but not least, "the faint sound" of the falling screw and the falling person that "draws no one's attention" suggests the reality of the atomized individual.

Consumption: Alienated from the Product

The migrant worker is also a consumer and a desiring subject. A careful examination of the writing of consumption in worker poetry may bring new insights into the worker's psychological mechanism of resisting – or reconciling with – their alienation from the product of their labor.

In "The Finishing Touch" 最后完工 (as part of "In the Print Shop") by Chi Moshu 池沫树 (Zhou Yunfang 周云方, 1980–), young workers are finishing the printing procedure of a component of famous brand sneakers:

brush, brush brush brush, our sweat flows into the six colors
 brush, brush brush brush, our youth dissolves in the six colors
 brush, brush brush brush, we imprint our soccer wishes into each shoe
 brush, brush brush brush, we imprint our basketball wishes into each shoe
 brush, brush brush brush, we imprint our love of sports into each shoe
 brush, brush brush brush, we, China, make shoes that
 traverse the seven continents⁶⁰

59 Goodman 2016, 197. The original in Qin 2015, 360: 一颗螺丝掉在地上 / 在这个加班的夜晚 / 垂直降落, 轻轻一响 / 不会引起任何人的注意 / 就像在此之前 / 某个相同的夜晚 / 有个人掉在地上.

60 English translation based on Goodman 2016, 152, with adjustment. The original in Qin 2015,

At first sight these lines appear to describe nothing but making shoes. The word *shua* 刷 can be understood as both a verb (to brush) and the rustling sound of brushing. Either way, this word, by creating a textual rhythm based on repetition, builds up an auditory imagination of a busy workshop and the monotonous work in it. “We” are young workers, who just like any (young) consumer in the world, love soccer, basketball, and sports. This desire of the speaking subject is expressed through their soccer and basketball “wishes” and “love of sports.” Yet the young worker and desiring subject most probably cannot afford to buy the very product they are making. Thus an ambiguous sentence emerges in the end: 刷, 刷刷刷, 我们, 中国, 制造的鞋子 / 踏遍了七大洲. The English translation cited above offers one interpretation, which understands “we” as the workers making the shoes. There is another possible reading: “we” are “the shoes made in China”; and when “we” imagine ourselves to be “the shoes,” “we” then have the freedom of traveling globally; read in this way, *shua* is the rustling sound of the shoes traversing continents. Certainly a strong irony lies in this imagined transformation: the worker has to reify his/herself into consumer goods in order to gain freedom. Nevertheless in this imagined transformation couches the speaker’s wish to overcome the estrangement from his/her product.

Wu Xia’s 邬霞 (1982–) poem “Sundress” 吊带裙 demonstrates another form of psychological mechanism of the worker as the desiring subject:

The packing area is flooded with light
 the iron I’m holding
 collects all the warmth of my hands

I will press the straps flat
 so they won’t dig into your shoulders when you wear it
 and then press up from the waist
 a lovely waist
 where someone can lay a fine hand
 and on the tree-shaded lane
 caress a quiet kind of love
 [...]

soon I will get off work
 I’ll wash my sweaty uniform
 and the sundress will be packed and shipped ...
 it will wait just for you
 on an afternoon or a night

302: 刷, 刷刷刷, 我们的汗水流在了六种颜色里 / 刷, 刷刷刷, 我们把青春也撒在了六种颜色里 / 刷, 刷刷刷, 我们把对足球的祝福印在了每一只鞋里 / 刷, 刷刷刷, 我们把篮球的祝福印在了每一只鞋里 / 刷, 刷刷刷, 我们把对体育运动的热爱印在了每一只鞋里 / 刷, 刷刷刷, 我们, 中国, 制造的鞋子 / 踏遍了七大洲.

Unknown girl
I love you⁶¹

The poem is a monologue, in which the lyrical “I” talks to “you,” an imagined consumer of her product, the sundress. The first stanza about overtime work in the night also shows the speaker’s tender feeling toward the product, which is rare in migrant worker poetry. In the second stanza, the lyrical voice describes the ironing work while talking to the imagined consumer about how every part of this sundress will make her life beautiful. The last two stanzas sound particularly upbeat, displaying an (unreasonable) enthusiasm about the consumer, whom the speaker does not even know. I suggest that the monologue be viewed as an inner dialogue of the desiring subject, who is a worker and who at the same time imagines her happier self consuming the sundress she is making. Projecting onto this imagined self things associated with the sundress – beauty, leisure, and love, the desiring subject was able to exercise self-fragmentation, which, on the one hand, discloses the psychic damage caused by alienation, while on the other hand functions as a survival mechanism that helps the speaker to bear its impact.

Reified Time in the World's Factory

In economic globalization the worker experiences passivity not only in relation to their product (they are unable to decide where the product goes) but also to their time, and by extension, their life. Such alienation is expressed in migrant worker poetry as time reified into products. A case in point is Xie Xiangnan’s bitter laments in his poem “Anecdotes of the Front Lines” 前沿佚事:

My finest five 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, ...
(I’ve heard they’re shipped to America, shipped
to Western Europe, as Christmas toys, sold one after another
to blue-eyed children...)⁶²

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- 61 Qin 2015, 327–328. English translation based on Goodman 2016, 165, with adjustment. The original: 包装车间灯火通明 / 我手握电熨斗 / 集聚我所有的手温 我要先把吊带熨平 / 挂在你肩上不会勒疼你 / 然后从腰身开始熨起 / 多么可爱的腰身 / 可以安放一只白净的手 / 林荫道上 / 轻抚一种安静的爱情 ... 而我要下班了 / 我要洗一洗汗湿的厂服 ... / 吊带裙 它将被装箱运出车间 ... / 在某个下午或晚上 / 等待唯一的你 陌生的姑娘 / 我爱你。
- 62 Goodman 2016, 79. The original in Qin 2015, 226: 我最优秀的五年时间从机器的送料口进去 / 我看见, 这青春的五年从机器的屁眼里 / 出来 – 成为一个个椭圆形的塑胶玩具, ... / (听说这东西要一车车运往美国, 运往 / 西欧, 作为圣诞礼物, 一一出售给 / 蓝眼睛的孩子 ...).

In these lines, the time of youth, like raw materials, goes “into the input feeder of the machine” and its products are plastic toys sold to the children of developed countries. The way one’s youth reifies into products sold cheap and afar renders the labor inferior, worthless, and alienating. The crude word “asshole,” in addition to expressing the lyrical voice’s resentment and indignation, also turns the machine into a monster devouring human life.

Similarly writing on reified time, Chi Moshu’s poem “Watch Factory” 钟表厂 is replete with barbed humor:

I work in a watch factory
the watch factory gives no days off
since time keeps on going and life doesn’t stop
our work doesn’t stop either⁶³

I install my life onto the assembly line
dividing it into lunch and dinner, and breakfast used for a nap ...
and time keeps on going. Some go to America, some go to Britain, some
go places I don’t know⁶⁴

In the first two stanzas, the narrator describes wryly how a worker’s life can be reified in his/her product – ceaselessly moving timepieces such as the watch and the clock: the worker not only works overtime but also has become accustomed to perceiving his organic life in terms of inorganic production – by “installing” his/her “life onto the assembly line” and dividing it mechanically according to his working hours. Meanwhile, time in form of the timepieces – the worker’s product – circulates globally, unknown and unrelated to the worker. Yet like the poem “The Finishing Touch” discussed above, also by Chi Moshu, in this piece there are also attempts to resist this reification and expressions of the desire for freedom: the coworker of the narrator Little Fang dreams about assembling her life actively, “with luck and happiness / with love, youth, and the future spinning just like a watch.”⁶⁵ But her desire to organize her life as a free and hopeful one meets an anticlimactic ending:

But I’ve heard there’s a time difference with foreign countries, here it’s daytime, over there it’s night –⁶⁶

63 Goodman 2016, 155, with adjustment. The original in Qin 2015, 308: 我在一家钟表厂打工 / 钟表厂没有休息日 / 因为时间在走, 生活没有停止 / 工作就没有停止 / 我把自己的生活装配在流水线上 / 分中餐和晚餐, 把早餐用来小睡.....

64 Qin 2015, 309: 时间在走. 有的到了美国, 有的到了英国, 有的不知去了哪.

65 Qin 2015, 309: 把幸福、快乐/把爱、青春、未来一起像钟表一样转动起来

66 Qin 2015, 309: 只是, 我听说, 外国会有时差, 这边白天, 那边是黑夜 -.

Little Fang's dream of retrieving her own agency as a human being that is able to control her time and life encounters the "time difference," which may be construed as a metaphor for the unevenness of global capitalism: despite the fact that various timepieces measure the same clock time, time has different meanings and values for people in different parts of the world.

Native Country as an Alien Place

New Left literary criticism is keen on connecting migrant worker poetry to the construction of "the people," but this argument would hardly hold, when the politico-cultural term inseparable from "the people" – "native country" (*zuguo* 祖国) – appears as an alien place in the poems. In Wu Niaoniao's 乌鸟鸟 (Xu Yagui 徐亚贵, 1981–) "Rhapsody on the Advance of Heavy Snow" 大雪压境狂想曲, the speaker's native country is covered by artificial snowflakes leaked from a malfunctioning factory:

A snow factory in the sky. Mechanical
 assembly line angels, stand day and night in the noise and fluorescent lights
 numbly producing beautiful snowflakes
 the work overload makes them vomit white froth
 while the machines thunder all night. The overload
 makes them lose control. The oozing snowflakes
 crash down ton after ton. Suddenly my country [*zuguo*] is a swath of white [*wei yu mangmang*]
 and the smiles of thirty provinces are pressed into tears⁶⁷

These sentences portray a dismal picture of an accident caused by exhaustion from overwork: assembly line workers get sick from long working hours (again indicated by the fluorescent lights) and noise; the machines are overloaded and stop functioning properly. Tons of artificial snowflakes – possibly produced as cheap merchandise for Christmas – leak out of the factory. Interestingly Mao Zedong's grandiose phrase about "snow" – *wei yu mangmang* 唯余莽莽 (literally, "it remains nothing but a vast in vastness") – is inserted to describe the imagined scene of artificial snowflakes covering the country. The sublime snowy landscape in Mao's poem, according to Wang Ban, constructs the sublime lyrical subject that unifies "the loose contingency of individual experience and heterogeneity of subject-positions in the interest of total control."⁶⁸ By relocating Mao's original line

67 Goodman 2016, 164. The original Qin 2015, 324: 天上的造雪工厂. 机械的 / 流水线天使, 昼夜站在噪音和白炽灯光中 / 麻木地制造着美丽的雪花 / 超负荷的劳作, 致使她们吐起了白沫 / 机器昼夜轰鸣. 超负荷的运转 / 致使它们失控了. 泄漏的雪花 / 成吨成吨地飘落. 我的祖国顿时唯余莽莽 / 三十个省的微笑, 顿时被压成了哭泣.

68 Wang 1997, 191.

in this poem to describe a large-scale workplace accident scene, this poem creates a farcical version of Mao's sublime line, whose irony undermines the positive cultural connotations of the term "native country." Covered by white industrial waste caused by the overuse of human labor and machines, the speaker's native country turns into an alien place.

For the speaker in Xu Lizhi's poem "I Swallowed an Iron Moon..." 我咽下一枚铁做的月亮..., his/her native country is a place of shame for letting its own people suffer the insufferable:

I swallowed an iron moon
they called it a screw

I swallowed industrial wastewater and unemployment forms
those youth lower than the machine died young
[...]

I can't swallow any more
everything I've swallowed roils up in my throat

spreading itself across the territory of my country [*zuguo*]
into a poem of shame⁶⁹

Hard work, pollution, unemployment, young death... the speaker enumerates what a migrant worker endures. But in the end, all these become unbearable and he has to spit and speak them out. By introducing *zuguo* at the end of the poem, the poet relates individual ordeals consciously to larger problems within the territory of his native country. All these deplorable treatments the migrant worker suffers in his/her "native country" then deprive the term of its positive politico-cultural connotations, and as the result, prevent the speaker from identifying him/herself with it, even though s/he possibly would like to.

Concluding Remarks

Taking a critical stance against consumption-driven late capitalism and intellectual elitism, China's New Left literary criticism taps into a wide spectrum of Marxist theories to comment on migrant worker poetry, viewing it as texts depicting domestic social and cultural inequalities as well as economic exploitation within global capitalism and neoliberalism. While it is justifiable to regard migrant worker poetry as a testimonial literature valued for its function of social critique, New Left criticism strangely downplays a power-

69 Qin 2015, 360: 我咽下一枚铁做的月亮 / 他们管它叫做螺丝 / 我咽下这工业的废水, 失业的订单 / 那些低于机台的青春早早夭亡... / 我再咽不下了 / 所有我曾经咽下的现在都从喉咙汹涌而出 / 在祖国的领土上铺成一首 / 耻辱的诗. English translation based on Goodman 2016, 198, with adjustment.

ful part of that critique: the writing of the worker's phenomenal experiences of alienation, which is one of the most important notions of Marxist humanism and, as the last section shows, a major motif in the corpus of migrant worker poetry. New Left literary critics' (deliberate) oversight of "alienation" reveals its totalizing approach that perceives the migrant worker in terms of simplistic subaltern identity rather than acknowledging, in the Marxist sense, his/her individuality as a human being with artistic potential. In its rush to construct an identity of "the new worker" or "the people" out of the texts and their authors, New Left literary criticism fails to give worker-poets credit for producing literary works characterized by their rich and strong articulations of suffering due to alienation and the struggle against it.

The New Left reception of migrant worker poetry, furthermore, has shown a strong tendency toward reactivating Maoist anti-intellectual parole and anti-elitist (largely anti-Western) sentiment. This is ironic, because they seem to have forgotten that migrant workers' suffering and dire situation can easily trace its origin to the binary city-country structure that is precisely a Maoist socioeconomic legacy. In addition, these critics are themselves intellectual elites who possess access to cultural and financial resources, and whose connections with cultural institutions are powerful enough to shape discursive hegemony. Some of them are "media-savvy cultural entrepreneurs"⁷⁰ conducting the promotion of migrant worker poetry inside and outside China precisely by following the consumerist logic of late capitalism.⁷¹ Given the current political climate of Xi's China, what seems highly ambivalent – even disturbing – in the New Left literary discourse sketched above is its penchant for combining the Maoist cultural legacy with de-contextualized and simplified Western leftist theories to question the legitimacy of humanism and liberalism as elements of intellectual elitism and global consumerism.

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