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Poetry and Labour(s): Chinese Workers' Poetry from the Cultural Revolution to the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract This paper looks at two different manifestations of workers' poetry as a literary tradition: the poetry of workers, peasants and soldiers (*gongnongbing* 工农兵) and migrant workers' poetry (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌) Through a comparison between three issues of *Shikan* 诗刊 (Poetry Monthly) from 1976 and an anthology of migrant worker's poetry published in 2007, this study explores some of the most relevant differences between the two in terms of aesthetics and content, before addressing questions about the shifts in the positioning of workers' poetry *vis-à-vis* the political and literary authority in China.

Keywords Contemporary Chinese literature. Sociology of literature. Workers' poetry. Migrant workers' poetry. Labour.

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1 Introduction

Labour has always been crucial to mankind. People live off their own work, and not only literally: work never really leaves your mind when you depend on it for survival. To those looking for financial independence and for a shot at realising any plans they might have, labour is the way to a better future. To some lucky people, a job is an opportunity to nurture social relationships and to share thoughts and experiences. To other people, not quite as lucky, labour is a constant struggle which wears out both the body and the mind. For some of these 'others', unfortunately, the assumption that one might die on the job is also bitterly true: a painful status quo which needs addressing in venues other than this one, and more appropriate.

Yet, we do not live by labour alone: some people seem to live by poetry as well. They feed off poetry, they breathe it as if it were fresh air and – of course – they write it, against (and perhaps precisely because of) the living and working conditions they must cope with daily. The perfect example is provided by the trajectories and the poems of the Chinese migrant workers who, since the 1980s, have moved from the countryside to the cities, hungry for work and a better future. The term used (initially by outsiders with a derogatory overtone, and later on proudly taken up by the workers themselves) to identify such workers is *dagong ren* 打工人 – the term *dagong* is translated into English as 'working [for the boss]' and 'battlers'.[1]

Battlers' poetry, or *dagong shige* 打工诗歌, is an interesting product of the entanglement of poetry and labour – an entanglement which dates back to well before China entered the era of reforms and opening-up. Mao Zedong 毛泽东's sanction of artistic and literary precepts in Yan'an in 1942 institutionalised poetry's ties with labour. At first, labour was mystified and, indeed, idealized[2] as the subtext of communist enthusiasm. For the *zhishi qingnian* 知识青年 – the educated urban youth who, during the Cultural Revolution, were enjoined to move to the countryside to work –, labour was a harsh reality and although, as a theme, it does not appear often in the works of poets such as Bei Dao 北岛, Yang Lian 杨炼, Gu Cheng 顾城 and Duoduo 多多, representative of the generation of poets who began writing during the Cultural Revolution but who broke free from the 'underground' (*dixia* 地下) status only in 1978 (van Crevel 2008), I find it significant that they started writing poetry precisely while work-

1 The first rendering is provided by Pun Ngai (2005). As for 'battlers', the term comes from an Australian colloquialism, which van Crevel (2017a, 246) finds particularly fitting precisely because it emphasises endurance and resilience.

2 This holds true for much of what can be found in Mao era literature. Cf. Pesaro, Pirazzoli 2019, ch. 5; Cai 2016; Lin 1972; Chen 2011; Wang 2011.

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ing on the countryside, as if it were not only that people live off labour and poetry, but also that poetry itself drew nourishment from labour, flourishing out of and flowing from it.[3]

Here, I have chosen to focus on workers' poetry as a literary strand that has originated prior to dagong poetry and is tied to the experience of labour, which is its core subject matter. My questions are as follows: how does workers' poetry change, in aesthetics and content, from the Cultural Revolution to the twenty-first century? How do these changes relate to the context in which workers' poetry takes shape?[4]

2 Workers' Poetry and Labour

What is workers' poetry? To begin with, I believe that the answer varies greatly depending on the perspective from which one approaches the material: if we were to focus primarily on the content of texts, then we might assume that workers' poetry is that which portrays the workers' lives and their labour. If, on the other hand, we were to look at the authors' identities, then workers' poetry would consist of verses written by poets who have had – or continue to have – experiences of hard, manual labour, often on the assembly line and in the factory. A definition based solely on the content of the texts would leave out poems which originate in the hardness of labour but do not explicitly portray it; while a definition solely hinging on the figure of the authors excludes *a priori* poems that, although produced by individuals who have never had any experience of labour, are thematically akin to literature written by workers.

These issues have been discussed at length in previous research, both on working class literature at large (Nilsson, Lennon 2016; Foley 1993), and on Chinese workers' literature specifically (van Crevel 2017a, Picerni 2022b), with scholars loosely agreeing on four basic criteria for building up a definition: 1) authorship; 2) readership; 3) subject matter; 4) perspective. While Picerni (2022b, 15-17) offers a valuable discussion of the pros and cons of sticking with each of the above, here I am interested in the subject matter of workers' poetry: labour.

Some clarifications are in order. In China, labour has been invested with social and ideological significance throughout the last century, and such importance can certainly be traced back to Marxist thought: Friedrich Engels, in his unfinished essay *Part Played by Labour in the Process of Humanisation of the Ape* (1876), asserted that labour has

3 Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇 points out that: "To some extent, contemporary Chinese poetry arose in the hands of workers" (2015, 17, author's translation).

4 My take here mainly draws on the work done by van Crevel (2008) and his discussion of the entanglement of text, context and metatext.

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had a huge impact on the evolution of mankind – in fact, labour would be the realm in which evolution itself takes place. The conception of labour as an activity in which human beings achieve complete fulfilment and are dignified in their commitment to the common good and progress was consolidated in China during the Maoist period:

> In socialist China, working people did not view their jobs as merely a means of making a living. A job meant an honourable vocation, and workers were endowed with dignity. (Wang 2019, 73)

Not only was labour considered a source of dignity: it was even revered, and the working class was considered the centrepiece of society – a socialist society that was going through its building process, and therefore needed to boost production through collective effort:

> Working together to solve concrete technical problems in collective projects, they developed comradeship and solidarity. The workers were equal with technicians and managers, and participated enthusiastically in work processes. Everybody was eager to contribute wisdom, experience, and energy. Equality and participation meant the sharing of power and fostered pride in being masters of the new society. Most importantly, the workers were able to see the purpose and meaning of their work. (74)

The workers' status within society paired up with efforts to create spaces and forms of cultural production specifically dedicated to them: when not producers of culture themselves, the workers were the main interlocutor of intellectuals, writers, and artists, who had to think of themselves as workers. More generally, the purpose of socialist culture was to "serve and educate the workers by forging and spreading new ethos, new knowledge, and new artistic forms" (76).

During the first three decades from the founding of the PRC, then, labour and the people who engaged in it stood at the core of Chinese society, both for ideological (Marxist echoes and full-scale Maoism) and practical (the need for a total effort to build the new China, both physically and figuratively) reasons. In the decades since Deng Xiaoping 邓小平's reforms "discourses based on production have given way to discourses about consumption" (Li, Rong 2019, 779), and the status of labour and workers has changed greatly. Even under these relatively new circumstances, however, labour cannot be considered just any subject matter: there's no way around the fact that labour comes with its own history and ideological charge whether one is writing about it from the centre, so to speak, or from the margins of the public sphere (I will come back to this later on).

Here, I am looking at how labour, in all its facets, is rendered differently in workers' poetry through time, and the scope of my in-

quiry entails what is called 'worker-peasant-soldier literature', *gongnongbing wenxue* 工农兵文学, and migrant workers' literature, *dagong wenxue* 打工文学.

Worker-peasant-soldier literature was the embodiment of the CCP's vision of literature as accessible to the masses and conceived according to the precepts laid out in the Talks[5] (Iovene, Picerni 2022, 7), although the idea of using literature as an *instrumentum* to solidify the new nation comes across as a summary of literary discussions and practices that had been around at least since the May Fourth movement (Chen 2011, 66).[6] The push for the creation of a literature which could be the authentic expression of the workers became even more intense with the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 (Qin 2015; Chen 2011), with an emphasis on the importance of modernisation and industrialisation, two of the main pillars for legitimizing the new State. The relationship between the authors and the protagonists of texts from this period, however, was never of complete identification: only in few cases members of the proletariat actually made it to the literary stage, and the most successful authors in the first decade after the foundation of the PRC were mainly State employees in charge of providing models to emulate, which ended up implying some degree of division between manual and intellectual labour (Iovene, Picerni 2022, 7). Among the most famous poets of this period, Iovene and Picerni (2022, 7-8) point out Li Ji 李季, also known as the 'oil poet', *shiyou shiren* 石油诗人 due to his extensive production of political lyrics that narrated the exploits of oil extractors in Yumen, Gansu province.

During the 1949-66 period, some writers made efforts to provide the proletariat with the tools and knowledge to express themselves: from this came projects to guide workers in perfecting writing techniques[7] and the State itself provided workers with specific spaces of aggregation within which groups of amateur workers-writers were

5 I am referring to Mao's speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and and Art (*zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua* 在延安文艺座谈会的讲话), held in May 1942 and commonly called *Yan'an Talks*. Mao's intervention was extremely influential, as it directly dictated the coordinates of the PRC's cultural policy of the next thirty years.

6 Chen (2011) also discusses the specific features of literature produced by soldiers and peasant, which are to some extent different from those of workers' literature from the same period. What tied them together, however, is the function of literature as a tool to be employed to build the nation, and their focus on the revolutionary classes. Considering this 'shared goal', I stick with the well-established brand *gongnongbing wenxue* to design workers' literature from the Mao era, and poetry from the Cultural Revolution specifically.

7 Paradigmatic is the case of the writer Cao Ming 草明, who founded a writing group for workers in Anshan (*Anshan gongren yeyu chuangzuo zu* 鞍山工人业余创作组). The aim was to get the workers themselves to start writing, and it was achieved: Cao Ming trained more than two hundred writers in a nine-year period (Iovene, Picerni 2022, 9).

created. All these plans, however, concealed a fundamental problem: like other labels, that of worker-writer intrinsically presupposed a predetermined role within the political order and, consequently, bore limitations in terms of form and content, which granted little room for creativity and resulted in the highly standardized literature of the Mao era (van Crevel 1996).

Overall, from the 1950s to the 1970s, working-class literature remained a circumscribed phenomenon (Iovene, Picerni 2022, 10). Still, at least since the Great Leap Forward (1958) and the concomitant campaign to collect popular ballads, poetry – among all literary forms – assumed a prominent role within workers' literature. State campaigns to "turn anyone into a poet" were frequent, and often took place through collective writing sessions (10). The features of the resulting literature, written collectively and often inside factories, are effectively summarised by Qin:

> The factory was no longer just a unit of work for the benefit of the people, but also became an integral part of the revolutionary enterprise on a political level. It functioned similarly to a large family, created in the workers a sense of belonging and pride in their identity, and made them confident and satisfied with their hopes for future development. Thus, factories in which production was strictly regulated, working hours rigid, machinery hard and cold, full of environmental and noise pollution and where people worked hard were transformed into a paradise full of beautiful images and which could be 'poetically inhabited'. (2015, 10)

The trend was confirmed during the Cultural Revolution: the masses and cultural products by or for them were once again at the centre stage – in fact, worker-peasant-soldier literature became the only allowed literary output (Chen 2011, 72). Once again, however, not all contradictions were resolved: according to Iovene and Picerni, workers' literature during the Cultural Revolution was marked by the constant tension between "the collectivisation of writing, on the one hand, and the rigid limitations of expressive styles, on the other" (2022, 11).

Intellectuals, for whom it continued to be impossible to totally identify with the proletariat, were sent among the masses to re-educate themselves and, at the same time, train workers and peasants with the intention of enabling them to churn out literary creations compliant with the requirements of the time: poems had to be imbued with political meanings, have a collective and shared nature, follow popular ballads on a formal level and be based on codified and unambiguous imagery and symbolism.

Battlers poetry, or *dagong shige* 打工诗歌, on the other hand, figures among the literary output of the "underclass" (van Crevel 2017a, 246) of Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers which have moved from

the countryside to the cities since the 1980s. The life of the members of this new proletariat is decisively characterised by uprooting: since the late 1980s, 277 million people have moved from rural areas to cities in search for better job opportunities (Chan, Shelden 2017, 259), and their feeling of uprooting and nostalgia shines through in their writings (Xu;, Luo, Chen 2007; Qin 2016; Garbelli 2023). Their hope for a future in the city, which in most cases acts as a driving force for migration along with a sense of lack created by the perceived gap between country and city (Pun 2005), is systematically dashed: their arrival in the city often coincides with a stay in dilapidated and shabby dormitories, built in slums specifically designed to accommodate migrants and which further contribute to the creation of the workers' sense of alienation instead of providing a place to rest after gruelling shifts.

In these urban villages (*chenzhong cun* 城中村), migrant workers live in a grey area suspended between the countryside and the city: China's demographic registration system, known as *hukou* 户口, does not legally allow them to move from their area of origin, thus precluding access to some of the services that would allow them to settle in the city permanently (Qin 2016; Zhou 2016; Hayward, Jakimów 2022). The most popular destination for internal labour migration has been the Pearl River Delta, and especially the cities of Dongguan, Guangzhou (Iovene, Picerni 2022; Qin 2016) and Shenzhen: it was there that, in 1985, literary critic and university professor Yang Honghai 杨宏海 first used the term *dagong shige*, sensing that "dagong literature and poetry would become characteristic of Shenzhen" (Sun 2014, 157). This process of labelling is itself rather problematic, as Sun points out:

> Although worker-poets are the authors of many powerful lines, and are now widely referred to as dagong poets, they did not get to choose their own label. (2012, 1000)

The fact that the name was chosen by someone who enjoys social status and intellectual prestige decidedly higher than the workers themselves (not to mention his position within the literary field, as a critic) suggests that those who find themselves in subalternity, at the (low) margins of the system, can only aspire to be heard and recognised through assimilation by the system itself. Here, this seems to take place through naming – which is also cataloguing, limiting, and delimiting. On the other hand, however, the intercession of a spokesperson of the system guarantees migrant workers access to resources, sponsors, publication channels and governmental support at the local level through a kind of cultural brokering, whereby people like Yang Honghai act as intermediaries and create opportunities not only for dagong poets to be known and their voices to be heard, but also for the dagong community to strengthen and unite through sharing and confrontation (Sun 2012; 2014).

What about the actual voices of migrant workers, then? They rise in the form of literature (poetry seems to be the prominent genre) and other cultural practices (van Crevel 2019a). The value of migrant workers' poetry is complex and layered:

> As elegies, these poems often mourn the wasting of one's youth on the assembly line. As hymns of protest, they cry out against the loss of Chinese workers' privileged status as the master of the nation. And as testimonials, they give firsthand evidence of the extreme level of industrial alienation and injustice suffered by the individual in the name of prosperity and economic growth. (Sun 2014, 164)

The documentary value of dagong poems is far more recognised than their aesthetic value – although a zero-sum equation between high social significance and low aesthetic value does not tell the whole story (van Crevel 2017a, 275) – perhaps because the brutality of the labour experience is undoubtedly prominent in many dagong poems. The effects of labour on the workers' bodies has been a privileged angle for scholarship from which to look into dagong poetry. Picerni (2020a) dedicates an essay to the metamorphic relationship between the workers' bodies and the machines, which helps us understanding "the workers' condition today and the persistence of alienation" (9) in the workplace, and a certain kind of body poetics has been central in the study of Xu Lizhi 许立志 and Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼, both among the best known dagong poets today (van Crevel 2019b, 91).

Xu (1990-2014), an employee at Foxconn, rose to fame following his suicide on 30 September 2014: before he took his own life his works had been little known, and his sudden prominence triggered a process of meaning-making for which, today, his work is considered highly representative of the dagong experience. Van Crevel (2019b) argues that this appropriation is largely undue, and that the poet's posthumous fame has in fact contributed to the silencing of certain original aspects of his poetics, including the articulation of the corporeal dimension: in many of Xu Lizhi's poems, the body is not only damaged and mutilated, but is destroyed, disintegrated, self-destructs in order to transform itself into something else and, ultimately, dies.

The female body put to the test by the terrible working conditions in the factory is at the core of Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry. Zheng's literary (and, to some extent, commercial) fortune has helped granting visibility for the whole phenomenon of dagong poetry, even if her new status as a legitimate[8] actress on the literary scene – she is the

8 I am aware of how speaking of legitimacy begs questions about who gets to decide what is legitimate and what is not, and why. While I will not pursue these points

editor of a journal – has triggered a debate on whether she can still be considered a worker-poet in her own right (Sun 2012).

Whatever the answer might be, this question concerns issues of identity, which is a sensitive topic among migrant workers and has been inspected by scholars such as Sun (2012) and Li and Rong (2019). The latter, once again featuring Zheng Xiaoqiong as a prominent case study, fit into a trend in scholarship which focuses on female migrant workers, or *dagongmei* 打工妹, from the perspective of an intersection between dynamics of class, gender and cultural productions. This trend is perhaps best represented by Justyna Jaguścik (2014) and Amy Dooling's (2016) work, both focusing on representations and self-narrations of women in migrant workers' cultural production.

Gongnongbing and dagong poetry came about at very different moments in time and, to some extent, they speak of and point at different issues. In order to track the main ruptures and continuities between them when it comes to how the experience of labour is portrayed, I have drawn on two case studies, presented below.

3 Case Studies

My analysis is based on a close reading of texts included in two publications which appeared at different historical moments and within different contexts: *Shikan* 诗刊 (Poetry Monthly) and *1985-2005 nian Zhongguo dagong shige jingxuan* 1985-2005 年中国打工诗歌精选 (Anthology of Chinese Workers' Poetry from 1985 to 2005, hereafter: *Anthology*).

The first issue of *Shikan* dates back to January 1957, when the publication of the magazine was approved by Mao. The journal was published monthly, with an exception between 1961 and 1963, when issues came out every other month. During the Cultural Revolution the journal stopped publishing altogether, but resumed its activity in 1976. I work specifically on three issues from that year – number 1, 4, and 7, all published before Mao's death – since they are a collection of worker-peasant-soldier literature from the Cultural Revolution.

any further here, I would argue that field theory – cf. Bourdieu 2022 for the original articulation and Dubois, Emery, Sing 2000 for an effective commentary; Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 2003; Fumian 2009 and Hockx 2012 for some applications on the Chinese case – provides a compelling framework to make sense of the workings of the literary scene at large. Cf. Inwood 2014; van Crevel 2017b; Yeh 1993; 2007 for the Chinese poetry scene specifically.

Shikan is a decidedly official (*guanfang* 官方) publication.[9] So decidedly, in fact, that it can be considered the epitome of officialdom, at least as far as poetry goes. Indeed, the journal is an emanation of the Chinese Writers' Association,[10] which serves as the "official body of the literary bureaucracy" (Picerni 2022a, 131). The association, founded in 1949, provides its members with benefits beyond the financial: the membership grants the formal recognition of the status of professional writer, which in turn results in the accumulation of symbolic capital.[11] Joining the Writers' Association is still, though perhaps less than in the past – since China entered the era of reforms and opening-up, dynamics within the literary field have become more complex and boundaries more blurred– the consecration to officialdom par excellence.

The same cannot be said about having one's work published in *Shikan*, as this does not automatically mean complete conformity with the establishment, but only that one's work has sparked the interest of the State's literary bureaucracy on the one hand, and on the other that it does not diverge from the official standard so significantly that it cannot be published. Some of the poets published in these three issues are professional writers with prominent roles in the literary establishment and are, in many cases, themselves members of the Writers' Association. Some other authors, on the other hand, are not professional writers. The presence of this category of authors proves how the official nature of a publication does not automatically result in a roaster of 'official' authors exclusively – and sometimes it is hard to determine whether an author is official or not, since many poets do publish on both circuits (Edmond 2006) – or exclusively professional poets: there is plenty of amateur poets (*yeyu shiren* 业余诗人) in these issues of *Shikan*, as if to prove that artistic creation was a collective enterprise, accessible not only to those who were professionally involved in poetry.

Unlike *Shikan*, the *Anthology* is much more *minjian* 民间 – here, the term does not mean 'unofficial' from an institutional standpoint, as

9 The counterpart of the category of guanfang is *minjian* 民间, mentioned below, which can be translated as "'(from) among the people', 'of the people', 'of the common people', 'folk' (as in folklore, folk music, and so on), 'popular', 'unofficial', 'informal', 'amateur', 'people-to-people', 'non-governmental' and 'self-organized'" (van Crevel 2017b, 48). The dynamics between these two categories run through the history of Chinese literature from the Mao era, and are far from being a rigid dichotomy (cf. also Edmond 2006; van Crevel 2008; Veg 2019).

10 In Chinese: *Zhongguo zuojia xiehui* 中国作家协会.

11 It is worth mentioning that some members of the avant-garde are now members of the Writerse' Association, without this creating conflicts between a desire to place their aesthetics outside the officialdom and their accepting – when not actively seeking – the benefits of recognition from an institutional standpoint. For a discussion of the overlaps and intersections between the categories of avant-garde and unofficial and their relevance to the aesthetic and institutional spheres cf. van Crevel 2008; Edmond 2006.

the *Anthology* has an ISBN code and comes from a State-recognised publishing house – but as 'popular', since it originated from below and not from a fully State-run effort.

The *Anthology* was published in 2007 by *Zhuhai chubanshe* 珠海出版, a publishing house founded in 1993 and based in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, and edited by Xu Qiang 许强, Luo Deyuan 罗德元 and Chen Zhongcun 陈忠村, who themselves have a background as migrant workers – which I think is interesting since they share, at least to some extent, the same experiences as the poets they include in the *Anthology*.

Why, then, do I think comparing these two publications helps us answering the questions this contribution addresses? The two publications, in many ways, are at the antipodes: on the one hand, the three issues of *Shikan* date back to a time of extreme politicisation; on the other hand, the *Anthology* incorporates compositions from the mid-1980s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, thus covering a time of change and transition resulting from the opening-up of the country and from market reforms. The fact that labour figures as the core element in poems from both publications pairs up with these contextual differences, which makes the two publications suitable case studies for tracing the trajectory of Chinese workers' poetry since the 1960s: indeed, they make it possible to trace gongnongbing and dagong poetry back to a common matrix with its different manifestations (but more on that later on) and, at the same time, to ascertain how changes in China at large have played a crucial role in shaping said manifestations.

The texts I have selected are presented in the next section. They are quoted in full, in my own translations.

4 Workers' Poetry Then and Now

In gongnongbing poems from the Cultural Revolution, labour is the way for human beings to fully realise themselves and to contribute to the progress of society – the place where the boundaries of individuals disappear. Labour is also the way to a superhuman status:

> Above us the crescent moon,
> below us ten thousand lights.
> On the large new tank
> welders fight in the night.
>
> Thousands of swords of light break the Milky Way,
> the stars blink in fear,
> ten thousand arcs of light pierce the night,
> sparks like flowers in a spring garden.
> The arc of shining light

floods the warm fervour of the welders.
The warm sparks of fire
shine on their flaming youth.

Thousands of oil fields
to be adorned by welding pipes and tanks.
The tide of the great leap rolls forward,
hearts are filled with revolutionary enthusiasm.

Who are you, o welders,
who work aloft in the night?
From the sky a roar of laughter:
'We are half the sky!'.
(*Shikan* 1976, nr. 1, 27)

I believe this poem by Li Xiaolan 李笑兰, titled *We Are Half the Sky*,[12] exemplifies the celebratory way of portraying labour in *Shikan*. Not only does human effort defy nature and equal it in glory and power: the depiction of nature conveys even greater solemnity, as the moon shines on the effort of the welders (young and dynamic, as disruptive as the revolution should be), thus recalling a recurring trope in Chinese poetry, and the flowing sparks are as beautiful and rich as flowers in a garden in full spring.

The real twist comes with the last stanza: the poet reveals that the welders are women, and that they participate in the revolution as much as their male counterparts. The expression "we are half the sky" (line 20) calls for a double reading: it validates the equal status of men and women in labour as in the world at large; and it elevates all workers to a superhuman status by identifying them with the sky, or heaven.[13]

Another useful example to understand how ingrained the perception of work as a collective enterprise was is the following composition, by Feng Jingyuan 冯景元 and titled *Song to the Steel Rope*:[14]

A thousand steel strands come together,
ten thousand strands converge into a rope.
How great is their power, you ask?
If it pulls a mountain, the mountain falls!
If it hurls the sky, the sky collapses!

12 *Women dou shi banbian tian* 我们都是半边天.

13 For further remarks on women holding half the sky and on the vicissitudes of women's liberation in revolutionary China, cf. Zhong 2011.

14 *Gangsi sheng yao* 钢丝绳谣.

Tight as a steel rope! Tight!

The strands pulled one by one,
each one overflowing with class feeling.
If we strive to join the collective,
the breath of wind will not divide us,
the rumble of thunder will not break us,
the violence of the waves will not scatter us,
the erosion of water will not loosen our grip!

Tight as a steel rope! Tight!

Everywhere hand in hand,
we converge to the centre from all sides,
we pull in unison,
we tighten ourselves into a rope,
we squeeze into one heart,
we cling to each other!

Tight as a steel rope! Tight!

The crane waits to lift ten thousand tons,
the winch waits to lift its weight,
the ship waits for its anchor,
the drilling tower awaits its own moment…
To build the revolution we need
everyone's unwavering commitment!

Tight as a steel rope! Tight!

For meters and meters our direction is clear,
against divisions and afterthoughts,
against surrender and revisionism.
Up to the mines, down to the salt wells,
down in the ocean and up in the sky,
the vigour of the steel rope is invincible
and infinite the power of the united people!

Tight as a steel rope! Tight!

We tighten ourselves into a rope for revolution,
we sing the song of unity day and night:
together we are strong,
together we are secure,
together we triumph,
together we scale the summit.

> The party and the army all tighten into a single rope of steel,
> realists, revisionists, opponents are paralyzed by fear!
> If eight hundred million people unite as in a steel rope,
> even the sun and the moon will have to change their course!
> (*Shikan* 1976, nr. 1, 61-2)

Labour is a collective endeavour for the masses who are urged to meet the needs of the revolution. The author creates an interesting effect by what I call a reverse personification: it is not objects that are personified, but rather people that are depicted as objects. The strength and indivisibility of the collective are here rendered through the image of a steel rope, strong and mighty because made up of many strands tightly knit together and directed to one common purpose. The author does not simply attribute some of the object's features to human beings: he rather emphasises and praises those qualities which were seen as virtues among workers – unity, solidarity, and sacrifice for the common good – through an unusual juxtaposition of the animate and the inanimate, which breaks the traditional pattern of personification. We're thus left with an almost metamorphic bond between the workers and labour, with one flowing into and identifying with the other without anything alienating or depersonalising about it.

If we were to look at these dynamics of interaction between workers and machinery in a historical perspective, we might find that it resonates with Ding Ling 丁玲's *Eight Months of My Life* (*Bayue shenghuo* 八月生活, 1936). There, the story of the protagonist develops through her positive relationship with the machines, portrayed as living beings which need the workers' care (Laughlin 2002). Significantly, the connotations of such metamorphic bond between workers and machinery (or tools) are turned around in dagong poetry, as Picerni (2020a) convincingly argues, and as some poems presented here clearly show.

Let us now look at how *dagong* poets represent their own experience in the *Anthology*:

> *In the Industrial Zone*[15]
>
> Every day out of breath through the streets of the industrial area
> I rush to the electronics factory for my turn
> I, short-sighted, often
> can't see the tired smiles on the faces of my co-workers
> yet I see in the distance
> my appearance in ten, even twenty years' time

15 *Ren zai gongye qu* 人在工业区.

Sense of belonging, that's what's really missing
though I know every tree and every blade of grass of this place
I've gotten used to communicating in genuine Cantonese
and can rattle off all thirty-one factory names in this district in one breath
there's no future for me here
I am in the industrial zone, and yet
I constantly live in a place a thousand miles from here

As I walk on the streets of the industrial zone
buried by buildings
my malnourished shadow is as thin as the temporary residence permit in my arms
I long for the little metal in my body
to simply let the days run
with me
(Xu, Luo, Chen 2007, 60)

The difference is striking. In the first stanza of this poem by Zeng Wenguang 曾文广, the hiatus between individuals remains unbridgeable – more unbridgeable than that between the author's present and his future, still many years away – even when workers carry out the same tasks. In the second stanza, the author states that there's no sense of belonging, which is the consequence of living in an ever-foreign place, but also a consequence of the lack of communication with co-workers: the worker who cannot make out the faces of his colleagues is an image for such incommunicability – which is a trope to be found in other poems as well. This lack of communication or sense of belonging, placed against the "overflowing class feeling" in line 8 of the previous poem by Feng Jingyuan, points at the issue of class consciousness. Class is conjured up in poems from the Cultural Revolution, which were both to some extent descriptive of a real feeling of class unity among workers on the one hand, and an attempt at further reinforcing such feelings through a collective effort on the other. Even if Zeng's poem seems to offer no room for class consciousness among dagong poets – the first person creates and unmistakeably individual perspective – it really is more complicated than that:

Tanzhou 1996[16]

Prone on the steel bed in the dorm
I dream

16 *Tanzhou 1996* 坦洲1996. Tanzhou is a city in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong.

with the pencil I took from the factory
I put on paper the first branch of characters
I don't know if one could call it poetry
but my spirit is cleansed by it
and my soul begins to be invaded by it

The boss's wishes I understand very well
I arrange them neatly on paper
I transcribe in nostalgia
the tears of my comrades
I hold in a fist
their hopes disappointments despairs
and still, pain and anguish
sisters twins in our wandering life
leap on the page

These brothers and sisters, wanderers just like myself
with them I intend to share
my joy and pain
(Xu, Luo, Chen 2007, 71)

In this poem by Zhang Shougang 张守刚, the author seems to take up the role of a spokesperson for the whole dagong community: even though Sun (2012) has noted how some dagong poets do not particularly wish to think of their writing as a vehicle for instilling class consciousness, it is true that some kind of class antagonism between 'us' and 'them' appears in migrant workers' poetry. The issue is still a matter of debate within the dagong community itself, and it seems too early for outsiders to come up with definitive takes. At any rate, I would argue that in this poem the individual filter – again flagged by the first person – becomes so entrenched and unbreakable that, even when the author tries to transcend the limits of their own individuality and to share their experience with others, they cannot create a collective entity in which personal boundaries vanish completely, as it used to be in poems from the Cultural Revolution. Here, people only share common sorrows, and this never results in a complete identification into the collective: the feelings put on paper are sometimes the author's, sometimes those of others, but the 'paternity' of such emotions is never collective, despite the similarities. These emotions (hope above all) do however recreate a sense of belonging, which had been discarded in the poem above. As a matter of fact, hope indeed comes across as an interesting notion. When it means 'hope for the future', it seems to find no place in Mao era poems: this may be because hope implies some degree of uncertainty as to whether what is hoped for can be realised, while gongnongbing poetry is thick with certainty and goals that are certainly going to

be achieved. Hope remerges in dagong poetry, where hopes are either frustrated or are placed on goals so short-term and of such little importance as to appear futile.[17]

These examples show how the perception of labour changes from Mao era workers' poetry to the poetry written by migrant workers since the mid-1980s. Labour moves from being a collective effort intertwined with dynamics of class to an individual experience, usually of suffering and alienation, in which class consciousness is itself a contested notion. The new individual perspective often turns into autobiography and is incredibly effective in conveying the workers' condition of loneliness and isolation, not only *vis-à-vis* society, but also among themselves.

These differences are brought about not only by the shifts in the social condition of workers, but also by the 'literary moments' within which gongnongbing poetry and dagong poetry are embedded. Some features of the poems published in *Shikan* – the identification of the individual with the collective and the sense of belonging – can be traced back to the political lyric (in Chinese *zhengzhi shuqing shi* 政治抒情诗), which appeared in the first decades of the PRC's existence (Ning 2011) and became very popular, very quickly. Its main feature was the full compliance with the ideological requirements set by Mao Zedong in Yan'an in 1942: to serve the masses and the progress of the socialist society, to sing the praises of the revolution, and to glorify the working people united under socialism. Even though some of the main trends within political lyric – the sublimation of individuality into the political collective, and the expression of feelings only as shared by all and imbued with patriotism – had been started by intellectuals such as Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Ai Qing 艾青 and He Qifang 何其芳 in the 1930s, the authors of political lyrics were able, according to Ning (2011, 133) to empathise with the peasants and soldiers, thus relinquishing their own privilege as intellectuals. The resulting poetic form claimed to be the immediate expression of the feeling of an entire people, with the poetic self-reporting "the feelings and wills of an era" (Ning 2011, 132) while still being individual and discrete, insofar as the identification of the poet's consciousness with the collective feeling cast away any risk of personalism.

The sense of belonging, specifically, acts as a *fil rouge* linking political lyric, gongnongbing poetry and migrant workers' poetry, with some distinctions. First, a sense of belonging only exists if there's something to belong to: in political lyric, this was the collective engaging in the revolution; in gongnongbing poetry it came to be the collective body of workers, the working class; and in dagong poet-

17 Cf. *Please Mosquito, Don't Sting my Face* (*Wenzi, qing bie ding wo de lian* 蚊子, 请别叮我的脸) by Yu Jin 郁金 (Xu, Luo, Chen 2007, 135-6).

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ry it is a subaltern and marginalised social group, made up of individuals with shared experiences which are usually rendered in poetry through an individual lens. This individual focus owes much to the literary surroundings in which dagong poetry emerged: a tendency towards introspection has characterised Chinese poetry at large at least since Obscure Poetry (*menglong shi* 朦胧诗). Michelle Yeh (1992) indeed argues that individualism and the turning away from external reality (and politics) as a reference for the poets are the main features of Obscure Poetry. In this sense, then, while we can still find traces of some sense of belonging in migrant workers' poetry, it is placed within new coordinates dictated by the social and political changes of the late 1970s and mid-1980s – and, after that, of the market reforms of the early 1990s – and by new literary trends. The sense of belonging refers to a social group embedded in a structure of domination whose full weight shines through in the poems, and membership to such a group no longer means sublimation of the individual into the collective: one can always spot atomised, individual trajectories.

Overall, labour moved from being represented as a collective endeavour to an individual experience. What about the way workers are represented, then? In Mao era poems, workers appear as central actors in the new socialist society: full of dignity, revered and respected, they take on labour and are, therefore, portrayed as heroes. Their status is recognised across society and rests on their labour, to which they devote themselves absolutely.

In many of the poems collected in the *Anthology*, however, workers are often portrayed as animals, insects, objects or, at any rate, elements charged with negative symbolism. I believe this kind of imagery is the poetic reflection of the marginality perceived by migrant workers – a social group whose existence is acknowledged but whose voice is seldom heard – and creates the image of a downgraded worker, deprived of dignity. In other words, the poetic dehumanisation of the worker acts as a literary counterpart to the degradation of the worker within society.

The following poem, by Liang Shuangcheng 梁双成 and published in *Shikan*, attests the heroic status of the socialist worker:

> Rays of light flood the stone nest,
> the quarrymen, heroes, bathe in humility.
> The old stonemason weighs the steel hammer,
> words tumble to the ground, resounding as metal and stone:
>
> "Catch it, young comrade!
> This is the hammer of revolution,
> to crush the cups from which the landowners drink the people's
> blood

and destroy the stele to the 'merits' of feudal officials.
"Holding the hammer you follow the Party,
and the hammer will carry out its commands.
Thirty years of fighting on the green stone slope
to build a fortress for the revolution…

Warm the blood in the young comrade's body
as he grips the hammer with both hands, his eyes watering with tears:
"Be sure, o hammer of revolution!
Forever we shall beat with you the drum of war!
You will crush anyone who stumbles
on the road of opposing revisionism!"

After such words the hammer dances in mid-air,
its shocks more imposing than towering mountains.
Red flags fly in the quarry,
and on Mount Hutou there is a group of heroes.
The spirit of Yu Gong[18] condenses in the hammer
And the old world will be reduced to dust!
(*Shikan* 1976, nr. 4, 70)

A heroic atmosphere permeates the whole poem: the workers are immediately identified as heroes, whose heroism is nonetheless confined to the quarry on which shines the golden sunlight – a plus to the aura of solemnity around the labouring heroes. The hammer is a metaphor for the revolutionary zeal propelling the workers: it is, in fact, passed on from one generation to the next like the sword in a chivalric poem and it invests the worker-hero, who is entrusted with the task of continuing the struggle against revisionism[19] and contributing to the building of socialist society. The workers, mighty as they wield the hammer of revolution, will smash feudal and colonial so-

18 Yu Gong 愚公 (The Foolish Old Man) is the protagonist of an anecdote well-known in China, entitled *Yu gong yi shan* 愚公移山 (The Foolish Old Man Moves Mountains). An old man, annoyed by the two mountains obstructing his doorway, decides to remove them through his own effort. The undertaking is obviously prohibitive, and to anyone who points this out to him, the elderly man replies that he certainly will not see his work completed, but that the generations to come, with hard work and perseverance, would succeed. Heavens, impressed by Yu Gong's attitude, make the mountains vanish. In 1945, Mao Zedong revisited the story in one of his speeches in which he called on the Chinese people to dig out the two mountains of feudalism and imperialism with perseverance and determination.

19 'Revisionism' refers to the process of to revising and modifying what are said to be the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism. Over the decades, the charge of revisionism became a tool in the hands of the CCP leadership to target those who advocated an agenda different from that of the leadership.

ciety to bits through an overtly violent endeavour, since there's no building a new world without completely destroying the old one – *jiu de bu qu, xin de bu lai* 旧的不去, 新的不来.[20]

Socialist heroism finds its greatest expression in the celebration of the Iron Man:

Always Fight Like the Iron Man[21]

He presses the brake handle,
drill pipes make their way through the layers of oil.
Suddenly he releases the brake handle,
a stream of good news gushes from the well!
Up and down the eight-meter platform,
here flows the torrent of the times!

Bursts, impervious roads...
They are not worthy opponents for us, the team of the Iron Man,
and if new records are to be set and high standards maintained
that we will do, without compromise!

To build socialism,
we must fight the bourgeoisie to death!
To consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat,
we must always fight as the Iron Man! Fight! Fight!
(*Shikan* 1976, nr. 1, 25)

The Iron Man – a Chinese Stakhanov – was a model worker in the Mao era, and his figure was celebrated and used to motivate the masses. There was an actual historical figure beyond the mythical vibes: Wang Jinxi 王进喜, born in 1923 in Gansu. After working as a sheep herder during his childhood, he began working at the Yumen (Gansu) oil extraction site at the age of fifteen. He gained admission to the CCP in 1956, and in 1960, when the Party leadership decided to open the Daqing drilling site in Heilongjiang province, Wang and the extraction team he led rushed in from Yumen. Despite dreadful weather conditions, Wang and his team found oil after five days of drilling and he earned the nickname Iron Man. His status as a role model for the entire nation[22] – his figure was widely considered an embodiment of the heroic Chinese spirit fighting class enemies and revisionism – went on even after his death in 1970.

20 A common Chinese saying which literally means "if the old doesn't go, the new will not come".

21 *Yongyuan xiang tieren nayang dou* 永远像铁人那样斗.

22 Børge Bakken has worked extensively on the use of models and model learning to educate and control people, cf. Bakken 2000; Bakken, Wang 2021.

Since a hero is more so in times of war than in times of peace, Cao Wenxiang 曹文祥's Iron Man does what heroes do: he fights. This happens in many poems from the Mao era, as workers are often busy fighting against some kind of raw material which needs to be tamed and conquered. The closing two stanzas of Li Guangyi 李广义's *The Loggers Love Green Mountains* are telling in this sense:

> Daqing's red flag is stuck in the mountaintop,
> the wave of hard work rises to the clouds.
> Oh, how many Iron Men
> Are fighting in the bushy forest!
> The metal axe they wield,
> fulfilling the dream of the thousand-year-old pines,
> they wield the chainsaw,
> And watch the green mountains smile for ten thousand *qing*.[23]
> For each log a thousand drops of sweat,
> and the stacks of wood rise higher than Mount Changbai,
> as high as the Great Wall on the clouds,
> as high as soldiers protecting the border!
>
> We love the mountains,
> not only with the warmth of our voices,
> but even more with all our wisdom, sweat
> and heroic spirit!
> (*Shikan* 1976, nr. 7, 43-4)

The Iron Man's no longer alone, as many have followed his footsteps by heroically engaging in labour, which is a fight against a substance that workers must tame by their own effort – an enterprise magnified by the juxtaposition of the stacks of cut logs to the Great Wall. The heroic nature of workers is unequivocally reiterated at the end, where they speak of their own 'heroic spirit' which leads them in devoting all their efforts to labour and the common progress.

If, on the other hand, we were to look for the same kind of heroism in dagong poetry, we would probably have a hard time finding any:

23 A *qing* 顷 equals 6,7 hectares, 0,067 km^2.

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A Frog Dances in the City[24]

A frog
in its body flows the blood of the countryside
but the soul is in the city
dancing in shackles
concrete grandiose buildings forests cities
stand on the fall of the land
they rise on the painful memories of a frog
what of that rippling water?
of those meadows the paddy fields
and of the home I dreamed of?

From the country to the city:
a difficult step, if that is the fate
one frog millions of frogs
willing to sacrifice everything
let the laughter of lovers
build on their blood, on their flesh

In a September twilight
in a corner of the city
I saw a frog
with no home to get back to
(Xu, Luo, Chen 2007, 122)

Here, Liu Hongxi 刘洪希 interweaves two dominant tropes in dagong poetry: he builds the poem around the image of the worker as an animal, while expressing the common feeling of uprooting and nostalgia. In the first stanza, the worker is a frog, animated by the energy of the countryside but constrained in chains by the suffocating and alienating life in the city. Both urban and rural elements seem to concur in relegating the worker to subalternity: the use of natural images in gongnongbing poetry further glorifies the power of the collective (cf. *The Loggers Love Green Mountains*), but rarely figures in dagong verses, since the usual setting for these poems is the city. When nature appears, it is benevolent only within a nostalgic afflatus for the sweetness of rural life. This is the case here (vv. 9-10), but this image is contradicted when, in verses 5-7, forests and buildings converge into one as their weight crashes the worker.

The frog's captivity stands for labour which does not yield migrant workers any benefit and becomes, in fact, a form of entertainment for someone else's amusement. The hardness of imprisonment is en-

24 *Yi zhi qinggwa zai chengshi li tiaoyue* 一只青蛙在城市里跳跃.

hanced by the image of the city standing over the memories of the migrant worker, as if the present were so gloomy as to even erase the salvific memories of the past.

As a final example of how the worker is often deprived of his centrality and heroism through analogies with animals and insects, I quote a poem by Luo Shibin 罗诗斌, who depicts the workers' conditions harshly and bluntly:

The Brothers of Xilingxia[25]

Xilingxia, village of workers made up by three characters
the stench of sweat, the smell of piss and mould
men, women, old, young
street sweepers, tramps, beggars, porters
fruit vendors, bricklayers, shoe shiners, sewer keepers…
The whole meaning of Xilingxia
is in welding together all these nouns and adjectives
with a temporary residence permit
Shenzhen, July the sun dazzles and stuns
like a sultry woman
early morning the brothers of Xilingxia
like ants, they pour out of the nest
like spiders, they crawl up and down
on the towering scaffolding
like worms, on the hard concrete
they sweat so much it looks like rain
like slugs, on the tired pier
they pant heavily
like flies, in a rich dump
they search for the trophies of their survival
with sweat they write their names – workers
but in the records of the police, or the administration
the name is often misspelled –
villagers, wanderers, garbage…
twilight the brothers of Xilingxia
return to the nest with their exhausted bags
their pale faces bury humiliating sorrows
lost gazes bear endless concern
as they pour a bowl of rice wine
dialects of all kinds sprout and bloom
in the cracks of concrete
is it not harvest time again
in the paddy fields of home?

25 *Xilingxia de xiongdi* 西岭下的兄弟. Xilingxia is a district in Shenzhen, Guangdong.

doesn't that clay hut
resemble mom's old, rheumatic legs
crying out in pain through rain and wind?
and can the children's tiny backpacks
fit the hopes of poverty?
the smoke rings rise and fall
one by one, amid nostalgia
sour tears caress the wounds of fate
drop by drop
in the dark night
(Xu, Luo, Chen 2007, 270-1)

The inhabitants of Xilingxia are stripped of their humanity and compared to ants, spiders, slugs, and flies: these analogies are not only drawn from the animal world – in itself, such a strategy does not necessarily degrade the subject. More significantly, they are all helpless creatures, generally despised by most, and always living off the crumbs of someone else's existence.

The pounding rhythm of the animal metaphors –which I have tried to emphasise in my translation – creates an association with one of Xi Chuan 西川's most famous works, *What the Eagle Says*.[26] In his analysis of this work – eight poems in total – van Crevel quotes a stanza from the fifth composition, entitled *Of my Intimate Experience of Things*:[27]

> 56/ Thereupon I shun my flesh and turn into a drop of perfume, actually drowning an ant. Thereupon I turn into an ant drilling my way into an elephant's brain, upsetting it so that it stamps all four of its legs. Thereupon I turn into an elephant, my entire body exuding a great stench. Thereupon I turn into a great stench, and those who cover their noses when they smell me are men. Thereupon I turn into a man, and a plaything of fate. (2008, 216, translation by M. van Crevel)

Dagong poets owe much to Obscure and post-Obscure poets in terms of the expression of subjectivity: here – perhaps surprisingly at a first glance – the reference is Xi Chuan (of all people!), regarded as the champion of poetry as a high, almost sacred form of culture. However, the metamorphoses of the poetic self in *What the Eagle Says* can be read as an expression of one of the distinctive features of Xi Chuan's poetics since the early 1990s (Crevel 2008, 218): the tendency to break the rarefied and crystalline atmosphere of his verses with incursions of much earthlier, material and even vulgar ele-

26 *Ying de huayu* 鹰的话语.

27 *Guanyu wo dui shiwu de qinmi ganshou* 关于我对事物的亲密感受.

ments. Upon these considerations, it does not seem so surprising that our reading can range from the harsh directness of migrant workers' verse to Xi Chuan's skilful poetic prose – which shows that we can and must locate dagong poetry within the tradition of contemporary Chinese poetry as a whole.

Multiple elements concur in drawing the picture of workers engaging in labour, and it makes sense to investigate how some of these elements are rendered in poetry through time. In this respect, my focus is on the depiction of working tools and of the hierarchical relations between workers and their superiors.

In the pages of *Shikan*, Qian Jun 钱峻 glorifies a section secretary and his shoulder pole:

The Section Secretary's Shoulder Pole[28]

The red flag pierces the white clouds,
the army that controls the mountain fights fiercely,
the shoulder poles bind to each other to form a dragon in the river
carrying the soil of Dazhai[29] on their shoulders, layer by layer.

Who is leading the thousand poles?
The old secretary rushes to the front line
the wind and thunder roar as he steps on the clouds and waves,
his great steps shake the mountains!
The long pole trembles,
sends gleams of light:
it is not adorned with gold or silver,
but soaked with the sweat of the secretary!
He often declares: "He who does not work is a revisionist,
no right to speak with no pole on one's shoulders,
the conditions are so good they motivate us,
the cadres must be at the frontline of revolution and production…".

Covered with mud on rainy days,
of sweat in clear weather,
the secretary doesn't look like one in his behaviour,
the revolutionary nature never changes!

28 *Zhibu shuji de biandan* 支部书记的扁担.

29 *Nongye xue Dazhai* 农业学大寨 (in agriculture, 'learn from Dazhai') was a campaign ran from 1964 to 1976, urging citizens to learn from the zeal of the people of Dazhai village. For more information, cf. "In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai (*Nongye xue Dazhai* 農業學大寨) (Xu Xiaojiang 許曉江), 2008-36". *Princeton University Art Museums Collections Online*. https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/55310.

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"Never on leave, now and always at work"
These eight gold characters are engraved on the pole,
like a decorated sword,
and Great Chairman Mao's teachings are the source of this strength!

After Dazhai's model, the secretary waves a flag
and always proceeds with great weight on his shoulders.
With the sunrise in his heart, great his ambition
to take the lead to bring days of light to the commune!
(*Shikan* 1976, nr. 7, 54)

The first stanza opens with an army of workers who, through the union of the shoulder poles, takes on the appearance of a dragon. It is through their working tools, then, that the workers become one and can fully express their strength, thus withstanding the waters of the river as they remove the soil of Dazhai (imbued with a mystical power). Their enterprise is once again enhanced by the confrontation with the clouds that, though high in the sky, are nonetheless pierced by the red flags. All this happens thanks to the Party's guide: the leadership is embodied by the secretary who throws himself towards the front line, his power shaking nature – an image of the leader radically different from that coming out of dagong poems (cf. *Glasses, the Mechanic* quoted below).

In his being a government official, the secretary moves away from the traditional idea of functionary (fourth stanza). The Chinese original reads *guan* 官 for both the occurrences – a character which was also used in imperial times: the poet thus suggests a contrast between the feudal official, who did not get his hands dirty, and the communist official, who is instead commendable in his fighting on the front lines alongside ordinary workers. The valiant party cadre and his shoulder pole mutually constitute each other: the instrument gains in power and sends out gleams of light not because it is decorated with gold and silver, but because it is soaked with the sweat of the secretary. He, in turn, owes his own mightiness to his role as the leader of the dragon formed by the many shoulder poles and, therefore, owes his own power to his communion with the instrument – and, through it, with other human beings.

The communion of the workers with their tools gets twisted and turned in dagong poetry:

Glasses, the Mechanic[30]

Glasses, the mechanic next door took his name
from the strong glasses that he, truly nearsighted, had to wear
every day he visited cars
back and forth, like a bulldozer he moved the steel tools
his face black, grimy his hands ruined, broken like the roots of an old tree
that overall, which he never changed in any season glistened with oil, grease
tenacious stains while cleaning components in the big
basin squatting or standing
he sang old love songs in the workshop his out-of-tune voice
mingled with the smell
of fuel in voicing his emotions the boss would scold him here
and there he would sneer
laugh sonorously fall silent for a moment then pick up again

Every time I took the car in for repair a cigarette dangled from his mouth
he would inhale deeply as he opened the hood
his face, glued to the engine was a lump of black coal, a blank stare
and the six degrees of his glasses squared right and left as if to scout the steel's bowels
or to look for a vein, thinner than hair

He liked to joke with me would point to the massage parlour across the street
and say the women in there have white, sexy asses
in the heat of the moment he would always
tap his toolbox with a wrench

He actually went there, to the massage parlour bumped into his fiancée
got into a fight with someone was taken to the police station
they broke his glasses and left his legs deformed
(Xu, Luo, Chen 2007, 297-8)

The image of glasses is central in Chen Shuzhao 陈树照's poem: the fact that the mechanic is named after his glasses creates a symbiosis between worker and tool/prosthesis, which culminates not in a celebration of the worker's power and prestige, but in humiliation

30 *Xiuligong: Yanjing* 修理工: 眼镜.

and mistreatment, much unlike what happened to the secretary and his shoulder pole.

Glasses are, ultimately, the only means by which the mechanic can work: right when he tries to take a step beyond his own condition by venturing outside the workshop and attempting to build social relationships beyond labour, he is no longer able to work – and the glasses get broken. The Mao era trope of the tool as an extension of the worker and a part of a symbiotic relationship is significantly revisited: the tool does not increase the worker's heroism; rather, the worker is such only through a prosthesis, which only reinforces his fragility.

In closing this section, I quote a poem by Li Mingliang 李明亮 which is a great example of how differently the hierarchical relationship with the leaders is perceived in dagong poetry:

It's Five 00 in the Morning, and This Is Shenzhen[31]

The stars are still lying embraced in dewdrops
it's five 00, the sound of the bell pierces the walls
and rips through those who sleep on the mats,
it cuts them in half

Keep up the pace! For the orders, fight!
the boss's commands
force us to hop off the bus
every day at 5:20
to begin a 15-hour struggle
with the machines

I slowly put on my uniform
I have not yet brushed my teeth, my face
but that's ok
I've already stifled the habit of waking up early to take a dump
and I even got used to not eating breakfast
since I joined the factory

I glance at the clock
it's still 900 seconds to 5:20
I can choke on the smoke of a cigarette

I yawn
the road to the factory is dotted
of snow-shiny lights stabbing my eyes
the whisper of a tear tells me

31 *Zhe shi lingchen wu dian ling ling fen de Shenzhen* 这是凌晨五点零零分的深圳.

> it's just past five 00 in the morning, and this is Shenzhen
> far away from your little mountain village in southern Anhui
> (Xu, Luo, Chen 2007, 139-40)

The piercing sound of the bell throws the reader into the worker's painful routine: in the third stanza, the uniform marks the 'official' beginning of the workday regardless of any human need. The worker is left with barely enough time for a cigarette before the start of a 15 hour-long shift which is a strenuous fight against the machines – a fight which has nothing heroic about it, and which starkly contrasts both with Ding Ling's picture of machines as living beings in *Eight Months of My Life*, where the machines were tenderly depicted as in need of the apprentice's care, and with images of sacred working tools from the Cultural Revolution. What's more, the boss in Li's poem becomes the one who forces exploitation upon the workers not for collective progress or to overcome nature, but to keep up with the orders received, to satisfy customers and to fit within the capitalist logic of unbridled profit. This is of course very different from what happens in, say, *The Section Secretary's Shoulder Pole*, where the leader inspires fellow workers by example. On the other hand, however, it kind of resonates – that's right, once again – with the apprentice's "shabby treatment" (Laughlin 2002, 140) by the managers in Ding Ling's *Eight Months of My Life*, thus allowing for a joint reading which reaches back to before the Mao era.

5 Text and Context

The traditions of Marxist literary criticism (cf. Williams 1985; Eagleton 2006) and of sociology of literature (Bourdieu, quoted above, is the first example that comes to mind) have long established that literature does not exist in a void, but it takes shape under certain material and ideological conditions, all of which are specific and historically determined. I subscribe to this idea myself, and I think it makes sense to situate the evidence from the close reading *vis-à-vis* the shifts that have been taking place in China in the last fifty years or so.

I believe that the changes in how labour is rendered in poetry are to some extent a reflection of the social and ideological changes that have been sweeping across China from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Mao's death and the turnover at the top of the CCP undoubtedly brought about a huge turn in people's lives, particularly from 1978 onward as the era of reform and opening-up began. China's opening-up to the rest of the world was the prelude to the economic reforms of the early 1990s and to the country's entry into the market economy, which was a turning point for the workers: from pivotal subjects for the construction of the socialist society, the work-

ers became a kind of commodity, a means through which to achieve the ultimate goal – profit – and which could be disposed of without great concern when their services were no longer required (Russo 2019, 31). The new labour market called for cheap, disposable workforce, and that's where rural-to-urban migrant workers came in. But there's more: the new political order and the new scale of values defined from the 1980s entailed what Dooling calls a "consumer revolution" (2016, 134), i.e. a discursive shift from the emphasis on production to that on consumption. Such shift has disempowered workers by taking away their place within society, not just materially but also discursively: as Li and Rong (2019) convincingly argue, the State authority, by steering the public discourse towards consumption, has encouraged workers to "become middle-class" (773), and fully realise their potential as consumers. This, however, clashes with the material conditions of migrant workers, whose precariousness and meagre salary make their middle class dream unaffordable. Caught between an unreachable middle-class horizon and a present of non-identity dictated by the hukou system, which does not acknowledge migrants within the urban space, migrant workers find themselves at the margins of the public sphere, without a discursive site from which to "articulate resistance" (779).

In a nutshell, then, these material and ideological shifts have transformed the worker from a truly political subject, member of a class which stood at the core of the socialist State, to a largely atomised and de-politicised individual trying to get out of the fringes of society by chasing an unrealisable middle-class dream. This transformation shines through the way labour has been rendered in workers' poetry.

Here, I have identified a few major aesthetic differences. In poems from the Cultural Revolution, labour is a collective enterprise in which there's room for individuals only insofar as they merge into the collective – a collective which has the looks of a solid, clearly identifiable working class tied together by a strong common consciousness which poetry at the same time celebrates and reinforces. For dagong poets, however, not only labour becomes a purely individual matter: it's a matter of suffering and alienation. We're thus left with a revisitation of the trope of the tension between collective and private, in which, however, the private dimension now has the upper hand:[32] we move from a celebration of the collective (class) struggle in the name of glorious ideals to the painful and intimate depiction of the worker's sense of subalternity.

32 This appears to confirm a general trend in post-Maoist iconography of labour (Meyskens 2019, 108).

The second point has to do with how the worker is portrayed. In the glorious labour enterprise of the Mao era, workers can only be heroes, central to the unfolding of the enterprise itself, endowed with mystical power: the example par excellence is certainly the Iron Man, central in many of the poems from *Shikan* analysed here. The fact that these worker-heroes must tame nature results in images of cyclopean efforts which elevate the worker to an almost superhuman condition. In so many examples of dagong poetry, on the contrary, the worker's sense of smallness, subalternity and estrangement in the urban dimension – accentuated by images of an imposing, towering city – is conveyed by juxtaposing workers with insects and animals, depriving them of humanity and dignity.

Another significant difference concerns the way working tools are described. In this sense, gongnongbing and dagong poetry are certainly linked by the common focus on technical details and by a tendency to the meticulous depiction of tools. Such trope, however, is employed for different purposes, and at different degrees of intensity: some dagong authors, including Zheng Xiaoqiong, even make technical language the mainstay of a realist description of the working environment. The work tool is, in the Mao era, a sacred object: the workers enhance their own power and heroism by wielding the tool, and the tool is itself ennobled and sacralised precisely because the workers use it. In dagong poetry, on the other hand, the relationship between human and tool, while remaining symbiotic or metamorphic, is not beneficial to either party: the worker's existence is essentialised to some downgrading traits, and the tool is often the only guarantee of the human's ability to work, thus reinforcing the worker's fragility and precariousness.

Finally, the relationship between workers and their superiors is rendered rather differently in the poems published in *Shikan* and those collected in the *Anthology*. In the Mao era, the labour enterprise is always pictured as a fight or a struggle, and those who lead, while certainly hierarchically superior to the workers, share their class, purpose, and endeavour. In many writings by migrant workers, on the other hand, the hierarchical relationship between worker and boss is (over)emphasised, and warlike jargon is employed to spur the worker to keep up with the capitalist economy.

Do all these shifts make gongnongbing and dagong poetry *liang ma shi* 两码事, or two entirely different things? I would be inclined to think otherwise – or, at least, to question such a stance. Qin Xiaoyu (2015, 1-3) himself finds a connection between migrant workers' poetry and what came before, as he points at the enlightening function of workers' literature and at its social significance (which were there during the Cultural Revolution and are still there today): in his view, the elements of novelty which have surfaced over time can be traced back to historical factors and material developments rather than to

the coming together of a whole new genre. I get how this argument might come across as based on too general and broad premises to be convincing, but I think the evidence emerged from the close reading carried out here might offer a valuable supplement to Qin's take. If we were to zoom out, we'd see how most of the aesthetic differences found here gravitate around few tropes which lie at the core of gongnongbing as much as dagong poetry: first, as we saw with *Tanzhou 1996*, the tension between the individual and the collective (be it class or otherwise) never goes away for good, and the sense of belonging (or lack thereof) surfaces in both literary configurations. Depictions of working tools, then, play a crucial role both in poems from *Shikan* and in those found in the *Anthology*, and the same goes for the workers' relationship with their superiors, which features prominently in both publications.

There are, in fact, continuities within difference: these common traits, I would argue, are there quite simply because workers' poetry – as a single, coherent tradition – revolves around the experience of labour, and all the tropes I mentioned here touch on core elements of such experience. On the other hand, changes in the material, social and ideological conditions under which the experience of labour unfolds, I have argued, help account for the relevant differences found between gongnongbing and dagong poetry (see, for instance, the glorification of workers during the Cultural Revolution *vis-à-vis* their demotion in post-Mao times and the way other tropes are articulated differently).

I would like to close on a general note: asking questions concerning the aesthetics of workers' poetry – which it makes sense to think of as a unique tradition, with gongnongbing and dagong poetry being its manifestations at different points in time – means engaging with it "on its own terms" (van Crevel 2017a, 280), as opposed to looking at it as downright commentary on the life experience of a certain group of people. This approach ends up taking context on board as well, and this time not just as what poetry is supposed to draw attention on, but as everything poetry builds on, interacts with and makes sense of. What we get from that is a better understanding of context through text, and of text through context.

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