

# **China, Workers and Poetry in (post)Communism**

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**Abstract:** The poetry of the Chinese migrant workers of the last two decades arises in the conditions of the zeroing of this communist promise and lives in nowadays era of the restoration of capitalist rule, based on the social and political non-existence of wage workers. The conditions of extreme social precariousness of the wage-earners, particularly the hundreds of millions of migrant workers, are manifest in their verses as an x-ray of the contemporary political desert and, at the same time, allow us to broaden our retrospective gaze on the workers-communism relationship.

**Keywords:** workers – communism – factory – poetry – migrant

The knot between workers and communism, which played a crucial role in modern politics, is undone. In an era that ended almost half a century ago, state communism of the twentieth century affirmed the entire political and social recognition of the working class under the leadership of the Communist Party. The poetry of the Chinese migrant workers of the last two decades arises instead in the conditions of the disappearance of this communist promise, and it lives in the era of the restoration of capitalist rule, based on the social and political inexistence of wage workers.

These are poems of great value, already recognized on the Chinese literary scene. These new poets, going against the tide of the extreme social precariousness of the wage-earners, particularly the hundreds of millions migrant workers, manifest an intense desire for artistic existence and remarkable stylistic skill. In addition to their intrinsic poetic value, their verses are an x-ray of the contemporary political desert and, at the same time, allow us to broaden our retrospective gaze on the relationship between workers and communism.

The situation of the workers in China has not always been the same as it is today. We can distinguish at least three eras. In the first fifteen years of the People's Republic, the worker-factory link was firmly inscribed in state communism under the uncontested leadership of the party. In the following decade, during the Cultural Revolution<sup>1</sup>, under the pressure of a widespread malcontent of the workers toward the party, new forms of factory management were experimented aiming at enhancing the intellectual activity of the workers.

Multiple experiments limited the division of labor that reshaped the relationships between workers, technicians, and managers. "Workers' universities" and "study groups" of all kinds, literary, political, philosophical, and economic, were opened in the factories. On the horizon of those experiments there was Marx's vision of the difference between a longshoreman and a philosopher to be in principle inferior to that

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<sup>1</sup> Russo 2020.

between a hunting dog and a guard dog. The communist goal of limiting the division of labor in the factory required the intellectual elevation of the workers.

These experiments, and these Communist political goals, were suppressed by Deng Xiaoping as a source of absolute disorder and anarchy. The "reforms" first of all restored the capitalist order in the factory in increasingly intransigent forms. However, the tremendous political labor activism of the long 1960s around the world was by no means a series of mere insurrectionary convulsions. It was animated by the search for new possibilities for the political existence of the workers beyond the framework of state communism. The political experiments in the Chinese factories of those years altered in an unprecedented way the despotic structure of the modern factory, on which Marx's diagnosis remains decisive. In those attempts by the Cultural Revolution to reinvent the socialist factory, glimmers of democracy were opened.

In a seminar held together with the new worker poet, 于坚 Yu Jian<sup>2</sup>, a great contemporary poet and professor of literature, recalled with acumen the atmosphere of a Chinese factory during the Cultural Revolution. The factory that he describes, based on his experience of a decade as a worker, is multifaceted but characterized by at least two original aspects: a significant relaxation of the rigid military discipline typical of the modern factory and, at the same time, the opening of surprising spaces of freedom for intellectual activities of all kinds.

"In my factory, there were people defined right-wing, former film actors, painters, dancers, various owners of the old society, descendants of capitalists and intellectuals. They were highly educated people, a kind of living textbook, and they became my teachers. I remember well the period in the factory. The funniest thing was when someone told a story; so many people told stories and put them together; they seemed like novels in which everyone was talking. There were frequent power cuts in that factory, so we had plenty of time to tell stories. Now, come to think of it, the factory was like a secret art school; it had revealed the identity of the coal-making machinery and equipment, but not the identity of the clandestine artistic activities. I remember that I had time to write poetry, sing, and play flute; there was painting, writing ancient poems, studying philosophy of science, and listening to the Voice of America. We also read Western authors from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whose works circulated in private. I also read the poems of 食指 Shi Zhi<sup>3</sup>; I read the brochures of Robespierre, Herzen, and Chekhov. "

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2 Yu Jian 2015, p. 396.

3 Shi Zhi is a poet considered as the father of the contemporary *menglong* poets.

Yu Jian humorously recounts some particular conditions in his factory that favored his intellectual and artistic formation, such as the presence of educated (downgraded) workers or even the interruption of electricity that created some free time. Yet, that mental energy aiming at ancient and modern poetry, flute, painting, philosophy, and nineteenth-century European novels was the “rhizomatic” result of the experimental opening of those years, under the imperative of reinventing the socialist factory through mass intellectual mobilization.

Yu Jian effectively paints the climate of that intermediate decade in the factory, completely different from the current restoration of capitalist discipline and very far from the 1950s. However, Yu Jian himself in the mid-1980s, wrote a poem entitled “In praise of work”<sup>4</sup>, which already revealed a decidedly changed climate in the relationship between worker and factory at the beginning of the “reforms”.

### 赞美劳动

我赞美劳动  
我赞美一个劳动者  
他手臂上的肌肉鼓出来 抡动着锤子  
他把黑炭砸碎 弓下腰去  
几粒火种 脱离他粗糙的手  
爆裂成一炉真正的火焰  
火光 照亮了他的脸  
把铁砧和整个作坊照亮  
劳动 就这样开始  
他干的活 是浇注一批铁链  
他肯定用不着这些链子  
他也不想 它们将有什么用途  
这是劳动 一个冶炼和浇注的过程  
说话的是手和工具  
把一批钢坯投进火炉  
浇注成另外一批  
废弃的犁头 锤子  
从燃烧的煤中出来 成为新的铁链  
他的动作和表情没有任何与心情有关的暗示  
他只是一组被劳动牵引的肌肉  
这些随着工具的运动而起伏的线条  
唯一的含义 就是劳动

.....  
4 Yu Jian 2015, p. 19-20.

*In praise of the work*

I praise the work  
I praise a worker  
with the muscles of his arms drums up a hammer rotating  
he smashes coal bows down  
sparks come off from his rough hands  
exploding into a full blaze  
the firelight illuminates his face  
illuminates the anvil and the whole workshop  
this is how the work begins  
his job is to pour iron chains  
he certainly will not need these chains  
he does not even think about how they will be used  
this is the work a process of fusion and metal processing  
it's hands and tools that speak  
he throws the iron bars into the furnace  
pouring them into something else  
abandoned plows hammers  
out of burning coal become a new chain  
his movements and expressions do not suggest any emotional  
concern  
he is just a bundle of muscles drawn by the work  
swinging lines follow the movements of the tools  
the only meaning is the work

We can consider this poem as the trace of a watershed between two eras, or rather between three. In the period preceding the Cultural Revolution, the political existence of workers had been glorified as intrinsic to state communism. During the Cultural Revolution, new paths had been opened. However, since the 1980s, work has already lost any political value. The worker's existence, Yu Jian writes, has no other meaning than that of work itself. Let us consider closely, through the lenses of poetry, the first and the third of these periods.

There are several voices of poet workers from the early years of the Chinese socialist factory, which were, moreover, homogeneous with the government discourse of the time. While tuned with the pathos of participation in the collective political enterprise, their verses were suffocated by heroic rhetoric. "Morning in the factory,"<sup>5</sup> a poem from 1957 by 李学鳌 Li Xue'ao, is an example of that ideological climate.

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5 Li Xue'ao 2015, p. 370.

工厂的早晨

英雄的烟囱像一条桅杆  
挺立在工厂中间  
巍峨的厂房是巨大的船舱，  
党委书记是我们红色的领航员，  
当四野还在静静地甜睡，  
我们就鸣笛起航——  
载着千万颗雄心驶进更广阔的一天！

*Factory morning*

The heroic chimney is the ship's mast  
which stands in the center of the factory,  
the majestic shed is the gigantic hold,  
the party secretary is our red pilot.  
When everything around is still immersed in sweet sleep  
we set sail at the whistle of the siren.  
Carrying millions of ambitions,  
we advance into a wider day.

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In the poem by 于德成 Yu Decheng, "Spring in the workshop,"<sup>6</sup> we can read an attitude that is at the same time enthusiastic about the communist project and distorted by the propaganda. In the scene of an Arcadian harmony, a glance in love is even drawn; it is not clear whether it is more for the girl or the factory.

春在车间

五色缤纷的铁屑正像盛开的牡丹，  
喷射的冷却液像一座飞泉，  
一台台机床正是一棵棵深绿的树  
一颗颗闪着金光果子挂在上边。

一个姑娘飞似地转动着手柄，  
她身上只穿了一件淡绿的衣衫，  
流着汗的脸上，  
像含着露珠的芙蓉花瓣……

车间里电灯像一排排大雁，  
一股暖流扑向我们胸前，  
门外的雪哪怕下得再大  
车间里呀，永远是春天。

.....  
6 Yu Decheng 2015, p. 384.

*Spring in the workshop*

The multicolored scraps of iron are peonies that bloom  
the cooling spray gushes from a flying fountain.  
The rows of machinery are green trees  
from which hang fruits of golden flashes.

A girl turns the handle as if it were flying  
wearing only a light green smock  
sweat runs down her face  
like drops of dew on a hibiscus flower ...

The lamps in the workshop are rows of wild geese  
a jet of hot air leaps onto our chest.  
Even if it is snowing hard outside  
in the workshop, it is always Spring.

The idyllic image of the harmony between worker and factory in state communism was shaken to its foundations by the political activism of the workers in the sixties and seventies, a phenomenon certainly not limited to China. The best artistic synthesis of the fall of the "socialist hero of labor" comes from Poland. Andrej Wajda's film *The Marble Man*, on the eve of the foundation of Solidarnosc, reveals the bitter fiction of that rhetoric, which ultimately overwhelms the most authentic intentions of the protagonist.

The poetry of contemporary Chinese migrant workers is entirely foreign to any "heroic" intonation. The subjective condition of life in the factory has nothing of the "harmony" of the classical socialist era, but there are also no traces of the disordered egalitarian experimentalism of the Cultural Revolution. These new poets indeed sing of their collective existence without referring to a "class," much less to a communist political project.

Actually, the boundless uprooting from any foregone social belonging prevails. The "we" of these verses is an "immense singular number"<sup>7</sup> (庞大的单数 *pangdade danshu*), as in the title of a poem by 郭金牛 Guo Jinniu, which was also chosen as the title of the first English collection of these migrant poets. The oxymoron reveals the strident dissonance between a singular desire for infinity and a condition of painful absence of sociality. The only relationship with the "homeland" of these figures condemned to perpetual nomadism, Guo writes with bitter sarcasm, is the "payment of the temporary residence permit."

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7 Guo Jinniu 2015, pp. 152-153.

庞大的单数

一个人穿过一个省，一个省，又一个省  
一个人上了一列火车，一辆大巴，又上了一辆黑中巴  
下一站

祖国，给我办理了一张暂住证  
祖国，接纳了我缴交的暂住费

....

哎呀。那时突击清查暂住证。

*An immense singular number*

One goes through a province, another province, another province  
takes a train, then a bus, and then another black bus  
Next stop

The homeland has granted me a temporary residence permit.  
The homeland has accepted my payment for the temporary  
residence permit.

(...)

Someone in the South breaks into a rented room  
Ouch! It's a raid to check residence permits.

Even more raw is the fabric of figures that intertwine in "Stones on the roadside"<sup>8</sup> by the woman poet worker 寂之水 Ji Zhishui. They are workers screwed to systems of machines but at the same time forced to whirl in a whirlwind in search of work, in incessant migrations that leave them like "abandoned stones on the roadside." Their mutual proximity is a shared chill, "elbow to elbow." Just the opposite of the warmth of "spring in the factory."

路边的石头

一阵风将我们  
从土地上吹了起来  
落在异乡的机器上，流水线上  
被噪音、机油、红黑胶、铅粉、铁锈浸泡着  
被抽打、拧紧、钉牢  
我们飞快地旋转着  
将乡音、呐喊、眼泪的温度甩出去  
直到再也挤压不出一粒汗水

.....  
8 Ji Zhishu 2015, p. 332

坚硬成一块石头  
被丢弃在路边  
就算回到地理也种不出庄稼  
不断堆积在路边的石头  
互相挨着，冷贴着冷

*Stones on the roadside*

A wind blowing  
lifts us off the ground  
and makes us fall on the machinery of another city, on an assembly  
line.  
We are impregnated with noises, machine oil, red and black ribbons,  
lead dust, rust,  
we are beaten, screwed, tied  
and quickly blocked, we spin.  
The dialects we speak, the cry, the warmth of tears  
they escape us until we cannot squeeze  
not even a drop of sweat anymore.  
We harden like stones  
abandoned on the street.  
Even if we go back to the countryside, we do not have to cultivate.  
Stones continuously stacked on the side of the road,  
elbow to elbow, the frost of one glued to the other.

The heterogeneity of thought and style compared to the workers' poetry of the 1950s is evident. Instead, the tones of these verses resonate with the 朦胧诗人 *menglong* poets<sup>9</sup>, who revitalized the Chinese literary scene in the late 1970s. The latter were the first to recognize the value of the new migrant poets; indeed, they actually discovered the existence of this immense contemporary poetic configuration. The meeting between these two generations of poets was partly intentional, partly casual, and finally necessary. In fact, several *menglong* poets, such as Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Mang Ke, Zhai Yongming and others, who were factory workers during the Cultural Revolution, also recognized that time as vital to their artistic training, as Yu Jian did in his above-mentioned memory of his experience as a factory worker.

In 2012, the leading poets of the *menglong* generation announced an "International Chinese Poetry Prize" (国际中国诗歌奖 *Guoji Zhongguo shigejiang*), open to anyone sending texts to an online address, *Artsbj.com*. In a few months, the site was flooded with 800,000 poems by

<sup>9</sup>Two anthologies of *menglong* poets, in Pozzana and Russo 1996, Id. 1999. See also Pozzana, 2010, rist. 2021.

thousands of authors. This result put a strain on the commission and caused an inevitable delay in the conclusion of the reading. Finally, 10% of these works were judged to be high quality, most of which were written by migrant poets.

An unexpected result, undoubtedly due to the sensitivity of the *menglong* poets toward the novelty of something they had an inkling. On the other hand, the poetry of migrants was driven by the poetic novelties of the previous generation. It has taken from the *menglong* the conception of an "independent intellectual space" of poetry, as Yang Lian<sup>10</sup> said, at a distance from the dominant cultural rituals. These new poets also share with their predecessors the suspension of the communicative self-evidence of language. They are looking for new possibilities of thought that spring from the "sparkle in the interstices" of language, as the poet 萧开愚 Xiao Kaiyu said in the 1990s.

To mark their proximity and correspondences, both these generations of poets position themselves on the edge of a void. The *menglong* started in the situation of exhaustion of all previous cultural and political references after the Cultural Revolution. For migrant poets, the stake is how to exist in the void of the very name of the worker. In China today, the "working class" is a highly obscure name.

The poetic energy of these workers manages to take this void as a resource. They affirm their existence at a distance from the void that surrounds them. In such exemplary alienation, the poem is based on an "estrangement" that precludes imaginary identification with the factory and demands that it be kept under control. For example, in 杏黄天 Xing Huangtian's "On Steel,"<sup>11</sup> the labor's materiality differs from the "colorful peonies" that bloom in "Spring in the workshop." Instead, the steel scraps are those that "pile up blackened and full of rust." The opening words of the two poems seem to face each other from an epochal distance, and without forgetting that steel was a key term for the project of socialist industrialization.

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10 Yang Lian 1999, pp.59-66

11 Xiao Kaiyu 1999, pp. 74-81.

关于钢铁

这个角落里堆满了这些  
锈红、暗淡的废物  
以各种可能的形状  
我们并不知道什么  
关于钢铁。只有猜测  
我们说金属的光芒  
说坚硬的质地  
还有黑暗等等这些  
都只是我们的想象  
想象的钢铁  
我们锤炼这些钢铁  
在其上打孔，制造  
我们想要的图案  
还有我们的想象  
但多么可笑，人这种动物  
永远在做自己并不能到达的  
练习，梦。一如这些钢铁  
一开始就离我们很远  
他们有自己的死亡法则

*About the steel*

This corner is littered with these  
rust-red and pale-colored waste  
of all possible shapes  
we know nothing  
about steel. We can only guess  
we speak of the luster of the metal  
of its hardness  
and there is also darkness and so on  
but all this is only  
the imaginary steel  
we forge this steel  
we punch holes in it and make of it  
the pattern of what we desire  
and there is also our imagination  
but how ridiculous it is. The human animal  
eternally does the exercises of what it cannot achieve:  
dreams. Just like these steels  
far away from us since the very beginning  
they have their own rule of death

Steel seems a self-evident thing, but in reality, it raises questions about which only conjectures can be made. A restless "we" (我们 *women*) recurs throughout the poem. A "we" that faces a steel belonging to the chiaroscuro of the unconscious. Forging steel involves a desire, including its imaginary and ridiculous side. The awareness of the unattainable "dream" is a memento to limit imaginary identification with these steels, to keep them away from "us," and to keep "us" away from "their law of death."

In a completely different key, the law of death, the intrinsic destructiveness of factory work, is explored in another poem by Xing Huangtian, "Work."<sup>12</sup> While "About steel" is impregnated with industrial materiality viewed from the distance of a dream, in "Work," there are three abstract figures: the poet, the "unreliable things," and the "Work." Note that "work" appears only at the end of the poem, as a figure of radical destruction, when the relationship between the poetic self and the "unreliable things" is lost.

### 劳动

我说，为了把那些不可靠的事物  
表达清楚，而这还不够  
我写，为了把那些不可靠的事物  
描述清楚，而这还不够  
我做，为了把那些不可靠的事物  
能够留住，而这还不够  
于是我劳动，为了把那些  
不可靠的事物彻底消除

### Work

I speak, to express clearly  
those unreliable things, but that's not enough.  
I write, to describe clearly  
those unreliable things, but that's not enough.  
I make, so that those unreliable things  
are maintained, but that's not enough.  
So, I work to eliminate  
those unreliable things radically.

What are the "unreliable things" (不可靠的事物 *bukekao de shiwu*) for which the poet wants to speak, write and act? We can hypothesize that it refers to the workers themselves, reduced to "things," as accessories

.....  
12 Xing Huangtian 2015, p. 151

to machines' systems, whose workforce is equivalent to any other commodity. Essentially inexistent. However, they are also "unreliable" because they contain subjective possibilities beyond their "reification." The poet has the purpose of "clearly expressing," "describing clearly," and "ensuring" that such "unreliable" subjectivities are maintained. Still, he also warns that his poetry "is not enough." However, if it fails in these poetic intentions, only "the work" remains, intrinsically aimed at subjective annihilation. His work as a worker is hinged on that destructive and self-destructive automatism that commands the subjective inexistence of wage-earners. The final lines can be read as a warning to persevere in poetry; otherwise, there is only connivance with the radical elimination of the "unreliable."

This configuration of migrant worker poets in China is so vast and multifaceted that it would take a much more comprehensive selection than the present one not to exclude great voices. In conclusion, I limit to "Kneeling to ask for a salary,"<sup>13</sup> a poem by 郑小琼 Zheng Xiaoqiong, author of several verses collections, which exemplifies the richness of stylistic tones explored by many authors. Her singular stylistic code is essentialist and cutting, drawing an almost theatrical or cinematographic scene. There are real characters whose expressions on their faces can be recognized, or vice versa, their inexpressiveness, joy, awkwardness, courage, or silent connivance. The scene is one in which there are myriads of small and medium-sized workers' protests taking place all over the country.

### 跪着的讨薪者

她们如同幽灵闪过 在车站  
在机台 在工业区 在肮脏的出租房  
她们薄薄的身体 像刀片 像白纸  
像发丝 像空气 她们用手指切过  
铁 胶片 塑料 ..... 她们疲倦而麻木  
幽灵一样的神色 她们被装进机台  
工衣 流水线 她们鲜亮的眼神  
青春的年龄 她们闪进由自己构成的  
幽暗的潮流中 我无法再分辨她们  
就像我站在他们之中无法分辨 剩下皮囊  
肢体 动作 面目模糊 一张张  
无辜的脸孔 她们被不停地组合 排列  
构成电子厂的蚁穴 玩具厂的蜂窝 她们  
笑着 站着 跑着 弯曲着 蜷缩着  
她们被简化成为一双手指 大腿  
她们成为被拧紧的螺丝 被切割的铁片  
被压缩的塑料 被弯曲的铝线 被剪裁的布匹

.....  
13 Zheng Xiaoqiong 2012, pp. 107-108. See also Tamburello 2019, pp. 45-64

她们失意的 得意的 疲惫的 幸福的  
散乱的 无助的 孤独的 ..... 表情  
她们来自村 屯 坳 组 她们聪明的  
笨拙的 她们胆怯的 懦弱的.....  
如今 她们跪着 对面是高大明亮的玻璃门窗  
黑色制服的保安 锃亮的车辆 绿色的年桔  
金灿灿的厂名招牌在阳光下散发着光亮  
她们跪在厂门口 举着一块硬纸牌  
上面笨拙地写着 "给我血汗钱"  
她们四个毫无惧色地跪在工厂门口  
她们周围是一群观众 数天前 她们是老乡  
工友 朋友 或者上下工位的同事  
她们面无表情地看着四个跪下的女工  
她们目睹四个工友被保安拖走 她们目睹  
一个女工的鞋子掉了 她们目睹另一个女工  
挣扎时裤子破了 她们沉默地看着  
下跪的四个女工被拖到远方 她们眼神里  
没有悲伤 没有喜悦 ..... 她们面无表情地走进厂房  
她们深深的不幸让我悲伤或者沮丧

*On their knees, asking for their salary*

Flash-like ghosts, at bus stops,  
on work machines, in industrial areas, in filthy rented apartments.  
Their bodies are thin like knife blades, like paper,  
like hair, like air, they cut with their fingers  
iron, film, plastic ... Tired, numb,  
as spectra assigned to machines.  
Work clothes, assembly lines, sparkling eyes,  
youth shines in what they constitute.  
In the dark tide, I can no longer distinguish them  
just as if, standing among them, I couldn't make out  
the movement of the other bodies, blurred faces, one by one,  
innocent faces that are constantly arranged and rearranged.  
They are the anthill in the electronics factory,  
the honeycomb in the toy factory,  
laugh, get up, run, bend, curl,  
are reduced to a couple of fingers and thighs,  
they become screws to be tightened, iron plates to be cut,  
compressed plastic, curved aluminum wire, custom fabric.  
Frustrated, proud, exhausted, happy,  
scattered, helpless, lonely ... so they manifest themselves.  
They come in groups from the countryside, from the villages, from  
the valleys; they are intelligent, clumsy, shy, cowardly....

Now they are kneeling; in front of them is the high and bright  
 window,  
 the black-uniformed guards in beautiful orange-green vehicles,  
 the golden factory sign shines in the sun.  
 The four workers kneeling in front of the gates hold up a sign  
 with the clumsy inscription "Give us the blood and sweat money."  
 The four, fearless on their knees before the gates,  
 around a crowd watching. A few days ago, they were countrymen,  
 friends, colleagues, superiors, or inferiors.  
 Now they stare blankly at the four kneeling workers;  
 they look at the four workmates dragged away by the guards, they  
 look  
 at a worker who loses a shoe, they look at another worker  
 who, while fighting, tears her pants. They watch in silence  
 the four kneeling workers being dragged away. In their eyes,  
 neither pain nor joy... they enter the factory with an empty look.  
 Their misfortunes sadden me, depress me.

The condition of those workers is pulverized. Even in the face of the pain of the four kneeling friends, emotions freeze on the expressionless faces of an inert crowd. The sadness and depression of the last verse ultimately share the feeling of insufficiency of the poem, manifested by Xing Huangtian. Poetry persists. But to overcome these misfortunes, poetry alone is not enough. Contemporary Chinese workers' poetry is a symptom of the need for new collective inventions to come.

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