2014

On 30 September 2014, twenty-four-year-old Xu Lizhi jumped from an office building in Shenzhen, meeting instant death. Not only was he the latest in a long series of Foxconn employees who prematurely put an end to their life, but he was also an accomplished poet—posthumously acknowledged as a leading voice in a cultural phenomenon that is often referred to as 'dagong *poetry'. This essay looks into who these* dagong *poets are and examines the political and social significance of their oeuvre.*

Bearing Witness to History: *Dagong* Poets from the 1980s to the Present

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At 2.30pm on 30 September 2014, a slender young man entered a lift in an office building in the industrial area of Longhua district in Shenzhen. The lift took him to the seventeenth floor, where he got out and stopped by a window. For five minutes, he simply gazed at the outside world. He then climbed on to the window ledge and jumped. He died instantly. Before jumping, he had written his last blog post to the world and set it to be published automatically at midnight, as the date changed to 1 October, China's National Day. The title was 'A Brand New Day' (新的一天).

The young man was twenty-four-year-old Xu Lizhi, a native of Guangdong Province, who looked as inconspicuous as any of the multitude of Foxconn's young migrant 'assembly-line workers' (普工) whom I met in Shenzhen while conducting fieldwork between 2015 and 2017. Like most of these workers, Xu had come from a poor family in a rural village and, with no more than high-school education, began working at Foxconn, assembling parts for the iPads and iPhones used by people all over the world.

But perhaps unbeknown to many of his fellow workers, Xu was a poet of extraordinary talent, with a long list of exceptionally powerful, sad, and sensitively rendered poems to his name. One does not have to read too carefully between the lines of his poems to realise that existential angst, and the appeal of ending it by leaving this world, was often on his mind. In a poem entitled 'A Screw Falls to the Ground' (一颗螺丝掉在地上), Xu wrote:

> A screw falls to the ground
> On this evening of an extra shift
> It falls straight down, making a gentle thud when it lands
> Arousing no attention from anybody
> In the same way that a person also fell to the ground
> On a similar night before this.[1]

Xu's suicide marked both the brightest and the darkest moments in the history of China's rural migrant worker literature. Even though Xu was already an accomplished and published poet prior to his death, most people in China had never heard of him; nor had they heard of the so-called *dagong* poetry (打工诗歌). In fact, Xu was the only poet from the '1990s cohort' (九零后) who was included in the authoritative collection *My Poems: Anthology of Contemporary Workers' Poetry* (我的诗篇—当代工人诗典), which features fifty worker-poets born between the 1940s and the 1990s. Qin Xiaoyu, editor of the anthology, included two poems by Xu: 'Terra-Cotta Warriors on the Assembly Line' (流水线上的兵马俑) and 'I Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron' (我咽下一枚铁做的月亮)—both written when the author was working on Foxconn's assembly line.

Like many other workers who also write poems in their spare time, Xu was often referred to as a '*dagong* poet'. But who are the *dagong* poets, and what is the political and social significance of this cultural phenomenon?

Rural–Urban Migration and the Emergence of *Dagong* Poetry

As other contributors to this volume have described, the start of economic reforms in the late 1970s precipitated widescale rural–urban migration, giving rise to a new social identity that has been widely referred to as *nongmingong* (农民工; 'peasant worker'). In the past four decades, this label has been loosely applied to anyone of rural residential status who left the countryside to work in city or suburban areas. While a small percentage of this migrant population has achieved significant gains in socioeconomic status, the majority are still 'working for the boss', which, in Cantonese, is *dagong* (打工)—a term that speaks to the commodification of labour.[2] Unlike *laodong* (劳动)—a word used during the socialist era to describe the respectable work of factory workers and rural peasants—*dagong* connotes the collective experience of being subjugated to the capitalist regime of the workplace, whether it be in the construction, manufacturing, hospitality, or domestic service sectors.

Dagong life in the manufacturing sector usually involves long hours and robot-like, repetitive movements on an assembly line. The assembly line's drudgery, boredom, and punishing effects on the body and soul hardly seem to present themselves as a likely muse for poets. However, despite being exhausted by shift work, malnourished, and mostly without much education, a small number of factory workers choose to write poetry as a way of coping with industrial alienation. Lamenting Xu's death in an

online *Zhihu* forum, one commentator said: 'Some people say he probably would not have died if he had not been a poet, but I believe he probably wouldn't have been able to last till today if he hadn't been writing poetry.'[3]

Indeed, since the 1980s, the loneliness brought about by displacement, the hardships of surviving in a hostile city, and the crushing effects of the assembly line have, in various ways, engendered a creative urge among a small number of literary-minded young workers, prompting them to put their sufferings into words, not in spite of, but precisely because of, the lack of intellectual stimulation in their work environment.

The first generation of worker-poets, who are now in their fifties and sixties, started writing in the 1980s, when they first arrived in the city. Several poets from this generation expressed to me their strong belief that the impact of the industrial regime on the human body, as well as the brutality of the local police in their dealings with rural migrants—which was commonplace in the earlier decades of economic reforms—would have gone largely undocumented had they not been chronicled by those worker-poets who had endured them personally. In their poems, as well as from my conversations with these poets, it is clear that *dagong* poets see writing poems as a way of testifying to the sufferings of a generation of migrant workers in those early decades of economic reform. They see their work as having captured the physical and spiritual anguish of a specific social cohort in a bygone era—experiences that are little understood by younger generations of rural migrants, let alone acknowledged by or documented in the official narratives of China's heady journey towards industrialisation and urbanisation.

Although many individual workers might write a poem now and then between shifts and in their spare time, the collective efforts of a few prominent poet activists are what have propelled *dagong* poetry into a minor literary movement. One editorial collective of such activists, led by individuals such as Xu Qiang and Luo Deyuan, was responsible for numerous *dagong* poetry periodicals, online forums, and anthologies in the late 1980s and 1990s, as well as *dagong* poetry festivals. Mostly natives of Sichuan and Hunan provinces, these literary-minded young rural people came to southern China in the 1980s—a decade that witnessed the most rampant and heightened urban and official distrust of and discrimination against rural migrants.

It is also important to note that the emergence of *dagong* literature would not have been able to capture the attention and imagination of the urban, middle-class literary establishment had it not received support

from some urban middle-class cultural brokers—individuals who held positions of power in Shenzhen's literary and cultural establishments. For instance, in his capacity as Director of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Cultural Research Centre, and later also Deputy Director of the Guangdong Writers' Association, Yang Honghai was one of the first to recognise the significance of *dagong* poetry. A literary critic, cultural bureaucrat, literary judge, and part-time academic in Shenzhen, Yang used his position to publish the work of *dagong* poets in the mid-1980s, taking advantage of a series of initiatives from local governments in the Pearl River Delta to promote an incipient sense of belonging to the new city among its migrant population. Yang is known to have coined the expressions '*dagong* literature' (打工文学) and *dagong* poetry (打工诗歌). Commercial imperatives also played a role in the emergence of *dagong* literature. In the hope of carving out a niche in the world of commercial publishing, established cultural institutions in Shenzhen in the mid-1980s started to publish *dagong* literature, including novels, novellas, and poems depicting the *dagong* experience, making them an integral, though minor, part of contemporary urban literature in southern China.[4]

Industrial Machine, Hometown, and Existential Angst

Most *dagong* poems, especially those written by earlier generations of poets, vividly document the urban hostility, hunger, and exhaustion that result from joblessness, sleeping rough, and endless drifting from place to place. Apart from the experience of discrimination in the city, the alienating life of long hours on the assembly line and subhuman treatment by management are other recurring themes. *Dagong* poets describe their sensory experience of being assaulted by the industrial machine in aural or visual terms. Some describe their haptic experience of the metallic surfaces of tools. These details not only provide the recurrent *mise en scène* of everyday life for *dagong* individuals, but can also be read as metaphors, as well as the exteriorisation of the alienated soul trapped in the initial stages of transnational capitalist accumulation. This is most vividly illustrated by Zheng Xiaoqiong, one of the few women *dagong* poets. Born in 1980 and a native of Sichuan, Zheng straddles the first generation and the two so-called new migrant generations (新生代农民工): those born in the 1980s (八零后) or the 1990s (九零后)—the latter of which includes Xu Lizhi. Zheng went to Dongguan and worked in a metallurgy factory for six years but spent all her spare time writing

poems. Her early works prominently feature metal, with iron as the most significant recurring motif, vividly and imaginatively evoking the sensations of the human body under the impact—literal or metaphorical—of metal (chopped fingers, crushed limbs, bruised skin, piercing metallic assaults on the eardrums). No longer in control of its own movement, the worker's body is 'repetitive motion and localised pain, a nervous system calibrated to machinic pulsations'.[5] Zheng has been compared to Allen Ginsberg—whose poems she admires—for her 'Pedestrian Overpass' (人行天桥). This epic poem features an individual who is crushed and twisted by the pressure of the industrial regime, howling at the world from the top of a pedestrian overpass.[6]

What is unmistakably resonant in Zheng's poems, and those of many other *dagong* poets, is a sense of alienation from the industrial process that threatens to take away workers' individual identities and turn them into machines. In one of her poems, 'Life' (生活, 2007), she writes:

> My name has turned into mere information on an ID card
> My hands have been welded onto the assembly line
> My body has been contracted out
> My hair is turning from black to white.
> This is a life without a name and without gender
> This is a life already contracted out.
> Moonlight shines onto the eight-bunk iron-framed beds in my dormitory
> Illuminating homesickness, furtive romance, suspicious youth
> If this moon was shining from my hometown in Sichuan
> It would at least rekindle memories of my youth
> If only to be dashed by a seven-day week spent on the assembly line.

Zheng's poem also exemplifies the fact that, besides highlighting the alienation of their industrial work, *dagong* poets express a collective nostalgia for the countryside they have left behind, and homesickness for their villages. Even a quick glance at the titles of numerous *dagong* poems reveals that *xiang chou* (乡愁; 'homesickness', or, to be more precise, yearning for one's hometown) is a key term in capturing the melancholic overtone of these works. These yearnings are exacerbated by the everyday reality of drudgery and alienation in the industrial regime, and by the migrant workers' socioeconomic marginality, which, in turn, colours their experiences in the factory. In many of these poems, the

home village takes on a heightened emotional significance. Even though the poverty and backwardness of the village are what drove the poets to the city in the first place, it now becomes an emotional resource in their attempts to endure physical, emotional, and mental hardships in the city.[7]

In contrast to the older migrant cohorts, who see themselves as sojourners in the city, the younger generations have little attachment to the rural farming life. Their existential predicament is summarised in the saying that they face 'a countryside they can't return to, and a city that doesn't want them to stay' (回不去的乡村, 留不下的城市). Unlike the earlier generations of *dagong* poems, which document the punishing hardships of life and work, the poems of younger poets tend to be narratives of spiritual homelessness, featuring a sense of uncertainty, hopelessness, profound disenchantment, and, in some severe cases, a widespread sense of anomie, which, according to Durkheim, can lead individuals into self-destructive acts, including suicide.[8] In this light, Xu Lizhi's decision to end his life can be seen as a final poetic expression of the collective sense of anomie within this cohort.

Readership and Social Impact

It may not be surprising to learn that few rural migrant workers read *dagong* poetry, even though their lives are its subject. It seems that most workers do not want to spend their precious downtime reading about boredom and hard factory work—something they already know very well. The grinding, day-to-day reality of a subaltern existence may be a palatable topic for those who do not experience it, but it has no novelty value for subalterns themselves, most of whom would consider *dagong* poems to be too close to their own lives for comfort. This general lack of interest in *dagong* poetry is certainly the impression I got from my conversations with Foxconn workers. At the same time, *dagong* poets such as Zheng Xiaoqiong are always keen to see their poems read by fellow workers. Some labour advocacy nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) with which I have worked also distribute workers' poems as a way of raising awareness of workers' rights and forging solidarity among workers.

At the same time, *dagong* poetry has made some inroads into the mainstream literary landscape in China, although not without contestation. As with rural migrant artists who face the question of whether they are 'true artists', worker-poets are also divided about the label '*dagong* poets', with some rejecting it, believing the expression implies inferiority in terms of

both the poets' social status and the aesthetic quality of their work.[9] Others are concerned about losing workers' distinctive social identity—and hence the social and political significance of their work—if they are described simply as poets. Within the literary/scholarly establishment, some argue that *dagong* poetry, by documenting the social lives of subalterns, brings fresh authenticity to the stale atmosphere of the literary elite, while others believe that there is only good poetry and bad poetry, and that judgements should be made solely on aesthetic grounds.[10]

For the same reason that it is difficult to make an accurate estimation of how many workers call themselves *dagong* poets, it is equally difficult to determine the exact scale and composition of the readership of their poetry. Quite a few anthologies of *dagong* poetry have been published recently by conventional book publishing channels, to be purchased mostly by educated urban readers in cultural institutions such as universities, the media, and those literary associations that take an interest in migrant workers' lives. It is also significant that the great majority of *dagong* poems are published outside the purview of official publishers. Some self-published collections do not have an ISBN number, and labour NGOs often publish workers' poems in their newsletters. Also, thanks to the ubiquity of digital forums, many worker-poets have taken advantage of online publication options. Some poets told me that publishing poems online, especially those with sharply political and social criticisms, also has the advantage of bypassing censorship, to which established publishers are subject. Favourite poems, or a few favourite lines from a poem, can easily find their way on to people's mobile phones, be it via blogs, social media subscriptions, or discussion forums.

Beside a small number of middle-class urban readers, numerous scholars, especially sociologists, have turned to *dagong* poetry to mine valuable—albeit not objectively or dispassionately collected—data. Increasingly, *dagong* poems are cited by scholars of labour conditions in China as firsthand accounts of the unacceptable living and working conditions of rural migrant factory workers. In a number of scholarly papers by sociologists and anthropologists both inside and outside China, lines from poems by and about such workers have been used as realistic cultural expressions of their experience.[11] This practice of quoting workers' poems in scholarly work implicitly endorses the empirical significance of these self-expressions.

Finally, *dagong* poetry has captured the imagination of some literary and artistic circles outside China. Some poems have been translated into foreign languages, and, from time to time, accomplished *dagong* poets are invited to speak to international audiences as part of writers' festivals and other literary and cultural events. These poems give readers outside China a valuable glimpse of what life is like for China's workers, and, by implication, of the impact of China's economic reforms and social changes on individuals. Zheng Xiaoqiong, for instance, has had her works translated into English, German, Japanese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, French, Spanish, and Korean, and she has been invited to talk about her work in the United States, Europe, Australia, and various Asian countries. In 2015, a German theatre director, K. Baumbecker, took his plays based on Zheng's poems to be staged in Beijing, and in 2018, Zheng's poem 'An Iron Nail' (铁钉) was performed in Cincinnati featuring two percussionists as well as the poet's own voice. Frederik Bous, a German composer, has written a symphonic piece about the nocturnal scream of Zhou Yangchun, one of the 100 women featured in Zheng's *Stories of Migrant Women Workers* (女工记).[12] A few US-based translators such as Eleanor Goodman and Xiaojing Zhou have dedicated their time to translating Zheng Xiaoqiong's poems into English. And a small but growing number of scholars based outside China have dedicated themselves to the study of this socially and politically significant cultural phenomenon.[13]

Summarising the social significance of *dagong* poetry, Qin Xiaoyu says:

> Workers' poems, even if they are just about their own lives, should be seen as testimonials on behalf of the entire cohort of 200 million workers who share the same destiny. They bear witness to the lives lived at the bottom of society.[14]

It is precisely for this reason that Xu Lizhi is still remembered by others after his suicide. His poems, alongside the poems written by many other worker-poets, continue to bear witness to the history of China's social transformation, rural-to-urban migration, and industrialisation, as well as the alienating impact of these processes on Chinese workers.