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Verse of Chinese Migrant Workers

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Neoliberal Intimacy: Verse of Chinese Migrant Workers

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Abstract

As China has been actively participating in the reconfiguration of world structure, Chinese migrant workers have emerged as internal/international diasporic subjects and post-socialist grassroots. Their writings address the alienation, hardship, precariousness and aspirations of their diasporic experiences in big cities, which represents an emerging genre – Migrant Worker Literature (*dagong wenxue*, 打工文學) and demands scholarly intervention. Departing from current approaches that interpret labor poetry (*dagong shige*, 打工詩歌) as either uproar of the proletarian or subaltern voice from the bottom, this paper will concentrate on how Chinese migrant workers embody a new form of neoliberal intimacy in the twenty-first century within the imbalanced global economy, though they have been occupying a crucial position in the larger historical and continental connectivities. It suggests that on the one hand, the marginalized voices of labor poets uncover their desires to become urbanites and cosmopolitan citizens. On the other hand, their lyricized everyday experiences function as the denunciation of a not-yet-post-Cold War era. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this paper will also delineate the literary genealogy of the cultural figure of migrant workers, tracing how these yearning workers emerged as both vital energy and surplus in a rising China and post-Cold War global economy at large.

Key Words

Labor poetry, Cosmopolitan subalternity, Desiring subjectivity, Neoliberal intimacy

My past, as hard as the assembly line, is packed with the latest iPhone
And sold to the other shore of the Pacific, waiting for the next reincarnation
— Xu Lizhi, "Migrant Worker"

Can one's past, like the latest iPhone, be packed and sold to the other shore of the ocean? In a poem entitled "Migrant Worker," the promising Chinese labor poet (*dagong shiren*, 打工詩人) Xu Lizhi (許立志, 1990-2014) not only laments how the lives (both their labor and their time) of migrant workers have been valorized via assembly line time, but also indicates an intimate relationship between these workers and the global circulation of high-tech products such as iPhone, although this intimacy produced at the expense of their surplus value and vitality. This poignant perception of migrant worker certainly comes from Xu's literary talent, but more importantly, he wrote of his own experiences identified with thousands of Chinese migrant workers who desire to change the fates in the big cities. For Xu, it was a dream for poetry and literature. What unexpected was when Xu's talent had been gradually acknowledged, the young poet decided to end his life by jumping to death. Xu's suicide received immediate media attention in China, mourning for this talented young man and speculating the deeper reason of his suicide. It also brings Xu's short life into the spotlights.

Grown up in a rural family in Jieyang, an underdeveloped small city in Guangdong Province, Xu Lizhi started to sell currency detectors after high school graduation. He was then quickly tired of this low-payment job and decided to look for a better opportunity in bigger cities in 2010. This decision not only brought him a three-year contract with Foxconn Longhua Technology - the largest Apple assembly factory located in Shenzhen, Southern China, but also numerous inspirations to write poetry.[1] Initially, Xu was so excited about his first exposure to urban life, especially the accessibility to bookstores and the municipal library. He even cannot wait to imagine a future that only existed in his dream before. Yet his passion and energy were quickly exhausted by the machine-like everyday life and brutal working condition. The act of writing, therefore, was turned into a way of speaking bitterness and eschewing outside hardship. In February 2014, Xu tried to apply for other jobs related to his beloved literary creation after he had finished the contact with Foxconn. Although he had published some works on the Foxconn journal and even wrote a letter of self-recommendation with great sincerity to the Shenzhen Downtown Book Mall, all his efforts and hopes ended with failure. On September 26 2014, Xu had no choice but to return to Foxconn with another three-year contract. Four days

[1] http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2014-11/24/nw.D110000zgqnb_20141124_1-08.htm

later, which was right before the 65th National Day of the People's Republic of China (September 30, 2014), he jumped out of the window from the AAA Maison in Shenzhen Longhua District, becoming another victim in the so-called Foxconn suicides. After his death, Xu's poems were collected by friends and published in an anthology entitled *A New Day* (*Xin de Yi Tian*, 新的一天), including the last words he left.

Xu's suicide also triggers discussions on his poetry. Chinese media count them as voices from the bottom ones that capture the precarious daily experiences of migrant workers. While the Western press tends to read these voices as a critical comment on the triumphant discourse of China's economic rise. For instance, *The Washington Post* regards Xu's work as "the haunting poetry of a Chinese factory worker, … [lamenting] the grinding ennui of the assembly line, the squalor of a migrant worker's narrow, frustrated existence." (Tharoor) The leftist website Libcom.org[2] also initiates a project named *Nao*, translating Xu's poems into English so that the uproar of this Chinese proletarian could be heard by a wider readership. Despite the disparate opinions of the press on Xu's oeuvre, his writing needs to be further analyzed in a genealogical study of labor poetry.

From a realistic perspective, most of Xu's poems address the alienation, hardship, precariousness, and aspirations of the lower working class (especially migrant workers from rural China) in big cities. These poems – though sometimes have been reviewed as lacking refined writing skills and polished language – document the workers' personal experiences articulated in their own voices (via the first-person narrative). Secondly, this self-expression of migrant-working life through poetry and its thematic focus on the figure of Chinese migrant workers also substantiates the (trans)formation of the represented subjectivity, which corresponds with China's neoliberal reform initiated since 1978. In their writings, Chinese migrant workers constitute an extremely diversified heterogeneous group including people of different gender, ethnicity and from various locations and cultural backgrounds. In addition to the heterogeneity, labor poetry also highlights the fact that migrant workers are not only builders of the the modernized China (cf. propaganda discourse of Four Modernizations), but also participants of the global economy, whose relatively cheap labor becomes a selling point to attract overseas investments and foreign capitals. In other words, as an assembly worker of Foxconn in Shenzhen, Xu Lizhi is not only a migrant worker who comes from rural China to chase his urban dream, but also one of the global working class exploited by the Apple company

[2] The poetry and brief life of a Foxconn worker: Xu Lizhi (1990-2014) https://libcom.org/blog/xulizhi-foxconn-suicide-poetry

in California. If Xu's writings are haunting voices from a suicide migrant worker in China, they are also specters created by the problematics of the contemporary international division of labor.

Taking Xu's poetry anthology and life story as my entry point, I suggest that rather than reading Chinese labor poetry as simply an uproar of the proletarian or subaltern voices from deep China that haunts the discourse of Chinese Dream, it should be contextualized and historicized through both contacts and confrontations between the rural and the urban, the local and the global as well as the North and South divides, which captures transregional connectivities that can be called the "neoliberal intimacy". Via discussing the figure of Chinese migrant workers sketched by Xu and his workmate - illuminated by the concepts of desiring subject (Lisa Rofel), international division of labor (Gayatri Spivak) and Lisa Lowe's employment of intimacy, this paper will also examine how neoliberalism functions as an apparatus for the subjectivity formation in post-socialist China. To conclude, this paper will try to situate Xu's anthology and labor poetry in the debate of Sinophone literature, proposing a reconsideration of what we may call world literature.

Labor Poetry: retrieved voices

Underscored by his biographical story, Xu Lizhi's dual identity (migrant worker/poet) reveals the inextricable relation between his literary composition and life experience, so do other labor poets. To better understand the rise of labor poetry in the recent decade, it is, therefore, necessary to start with a genealogical review of worker's poetry (工人詩歌) and to question what this emerging genre means in contemporary Chinese literary scene.

The genealogy of worker's poetry – one that develops a thematic focus on the images of Chinese workers - can be roughly divided into three stages, evolving three generations of worker poets. During the socialist period (1949 - 1976), worker's poetry sung for the grandeur of socialist worker (as an abstract and collective image) and aestheticized (and usually utopian) working experience through the forms of praise poetry (頌贊詩) and new folk song (新民歌).

Along with China's neoliberal reform stretching from the countryside to urban factories (1976 to 2001), two groups of workers carry on with the job to write about workers and workspace in transformation, yet from very distinct perspectives. Misty poets (朦朧派詩人) such as Shu Ting (舒婷, 1952 -), Yu Jian (于堅, 1954 -), and Liang Xiaobin (梁小斌, 1954 -), who have been deeply influenced by Western modernism and imagist poets, pay attention to the individual workers' subjective experience. Through the arts of obscurity, the image of Chinese workers has changed into wandering spirits at the crossroads. These poems, though

speak of worker's life, indeed represent elites' viewpoints. The other main forces in this transitional period are workers in state-owned enterprises (國企工人, hereafter as SOE workers), whose compositions can be read as the swan song of socialist past and the sublimed image of working class. These workers[3], who had been highly proud of their intimacy with the state and state-owned resource, underwent *xiagang* (下崗, Chinese style of mass laid off from SOEs), privatization of urban housing and social welfare, as well as other unprecedented changes in everyday life. (Cai 2006; Lee 2000) Their poems therefore also document their mourning and melancholia responding to the loss of the master's position, when most of them were forced to retire from both SOEs and the historical stage. Whether by coincidence or not, this forced exeunt was reaffirmed by another government move in 1999. On the Fifth Series banknotes of renminbi (第五套人民幣, first issued on October 1st, 1999), the images of Chinese workers from different industries were completely removed and replaced by the head portrait of Mao Zedong[4]. This monetary policy that is full of symbolic meanings visualized a farewell speech to Chinese workers, including their political, economic, and cultural privileges in the bygone socialist China.

Unlike worker poets discussed above who had represented socialist identity and had been prioritized as masters of the country, Xu Lizhi and other labor poets should be distinguished from their proletarian forerunners regarding their poetry composition as well as their unique life experiences as migrant workers. The well-known labor poet Zheng Xiaoqiong (鄭小瓊, 1980 -, garment worker) contradicts the categorization of their poems into worker's poetry. She insists that migrant workers are still peasants that engage in industry activities in the urban space. They are not accepted by the city but merely seen as temporary workers. As permanent outsiders, they have different feelings and life experiences even when they can occupy the same working positions that are predominated by urban workers (Qin 2015: 417). Taking the absence of urban village (*cheng zhong cun*, 城中村) - an important metaphor in labor poetry - in worker's poetry as an example, Zheng further demonstrates the radical difference between the two, especially when urban village demarcates the physical and psychological boundary between migrant workers and the city that includes urban workers. (ibid., 419)

Allied with Zheng's viewpoint, this investigation of labor poetry is more interested in how

[3] For instance, oil worker in Daqing Oil field and steel workers in Anshang Iron and Steel Factory can be regarded as typical SOE workers.

[4] For the Third Series renminbi banknotes (1962), Chinese workers appear on three banknotes: steelworker (¥5), turner (¥2), cotton spinner details see: https://web.archive.org/web/20040910104350/http://www.pbc.gov.cn/renminbi/renminbifaxing/renminbifaxingxianzhuang.asp (website of the People's Bank of China)

Chinese migrant workers articulate their subjective experience, seeking to retrieve their voices (via claiming their migrant worker identity) from reporters and scholars, rather than focusing on the cultural heritage that they inherited from worker's poetry. To further illustrate why identity matters to labor poets, it is necessary to bring Stuart Hall's seminal discussion on "Who Needs Identity?" (2006) to the case of Chinese migrant workers. According to Hall, identification could be a conditional "process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination" that is "lodged in contingency;" accordingly, the concept of identity is "strategic and positional, … [which is] about questions of using the resources of history, language and cultural in the process of becoming." For those who needs identity, the more important question is whom they are becoming and how they might represent themselves. "Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation." (Hall 2-4)

Chinese migrant workers undoubtedly are those who need identities. First, the designation of migrant workers in Chinese is descriptive that overlooks the cultural, ethnic, and gender dynamics. From the perspective of urbanites, this heterogeneous group has been named as *nongmin gong* (農民工, peasant worker, a notion emphasizes on the dual identity of migrant workers), *wailai gong* (外來工, worker from the outside, a notion underscores parochialism) and *dagong zai* (打工仔, a Cantonese based slang to stress on the lower social status and rural identity of migrant workers in Hong Kong and Pearl River Delta). At the same time, as a floating population (流動人口) without city *hukou* (戶口, urban household registration system), migrant workers have very limited access to healthcare, education and other state-subsidized services, not to mention representing themselves in their own voices. Although the plights of migrant workers receive certain attention, especially from the media and academia, they rarely have the chance to speak of their experiences.

In order to emphasize the reification of migrant workers as a labor force which is not only relatively cheap but also commodifiable to attract foreign capital and overseas investment, I suggest that we may translate *Dagong shige* into labor poetry[5]. The word labor firstly signifies migrant workers as manual workers from a collective perspective. Functioned as the modifier of poetry, it also implies a potential for migrant workers to become a social class or political force. The following sections, through close readings of representative works written by the well-known labor poets, contend that labor poets' practices of writing poetry should be understood as ways of their intervention through the usage of language and literary form, which

[5] *Dagong shige* has also been translated into battlers poetry (Crevel 2017), migrant worker poetry (Wright et al 2017), Dagong poetry (Sun 2010).

touches upon the overarching question of identity crisis and subject formation in China's globalizing path through neoliberal reform. Furthermore, via investigating three trajectories of the becoming process of Chinese migrant workers, it argues that through poetry composition, labor poets engage in the process of constructing subjectivity (or what Hall called identification process of becoming) and legitimizing their existence, despite that they have been treated as surplus labor force from rural village (農村剩餘勞動力) from the beginning of reform.

Becoming urbanite: yearning workers

When one reads the poems written by Xu Lizhi and other work poets, the city Shenzhen deserves one's special attention since it functions as a very important contact zone of various desires, especially for migrant workers who are eager to settle down in the city. For instance, Wu Xia (鄔霞, 1982 -) writes down her fondness of this city without reservation:

18 years in Shenzhen, hometown became strange land
Every day, I wake up with Shenzhen, sleep with her
I love her vigorousness, endless blossoms from Spring to Winter
Evergreen trees and grass
Her growing inch by inch. A love penetrates
In the pore, the skin, the cell, the blood, the bone
Though my name is absent from her household register[6]
("Who Can Stop Me to Love", Qin 2015: 329)

Rather than immersing in the feelings of displacement and nostalgia commonly described by other labor poets, Wu portrays Shenzhen as her intimate, where she has lived for almost eighteen years. The narrator in Wu's poem not only witnesses every step of its development, but also feels that Shenzhen has penetrated in her life and body. From the narrator's viewpoint, the faraway hometown (Neijiang, Sichuan Province), in comparison with the familiar Shenzhen, has been reduced to an abstract symbol of strangeness. In fact, Wu herself currently is a garment factory worker who belongs to the second generation of migrant workers. Since she was fourteen years old, she has worked in Shenzhen together with her mother. Before that, she had been one of thousands of left-behind children (*liushou er tong*, 留守兒童)[7] in China. From a

[6] All the poems are my translation if without special notes. I also intend to keep the structure and style in original language via using direct translation.

[7] Children have been left in rural area (usually live with their grandparents) by their parents who work in the cities. In most cases, they only can reunion with the parents once a year in the Spring Festival.

left-behind child to one child labor in the factory, Wu's growing experiences are deeply attached with Shenzhen and, to some extent, to those that have grown up together with the development of this city. Although her name "is still absent from" the local household register, no one and nothing can stop Wu from expressing her love to this city.

Here, Wu's writing underscores Shenzhen as a place of "growing," where she can feel endless vigor and flourish. This "growing" feature perfectly captures the spectacular history of economic development of Shenzhen as the earliest and most successful Special Economic Zone (SEZ) since August 26, 1980. In the past thirty-eight years, the city itself has embodied the miraculous economic rise of China. From a small, nameless fishing village, Shenzhen has rapidly developed into China's window city to the world, and more importantly, a manufacturing hub as well as a technological metropolis for domestic and international markets. Representing the China miracle, Shenzhen doubtlessly stands for China's re-worlding desire, bearing its ambition to the developments of hardware innovation (like Dà-Jiāng Innovations, also known as DJI), smartphone companies (such as Huawei, Xiaomi, Vivo, and Oppo) and other high-tech industries.

At the same time, Shenzhen also becomes an object of desire for transregional capital and migrant workers. It is favored by foreign investments and international corporations owing to the national preferential policy and its advantaged geographic location – a node city among mainland China, Hong Kong, and the overseas market. As the first SEZ, Shenzhen shows the government a model to collaborate with transregional capital, a shortcut to reconnect China with the global as well as a way to take full advantage of the rural surplus labor force. On the other hand, to fulfill Shenzhen's growing need of cheap factory laborers and construction workers, the government propagandizes its equivalence to a wonderland with a plethora of chances and opportunities for migrant workers,[8] which generates a collective desire – going to Shenzhen and become an urbanite – shared by many rural Chinese. There is also a deeper reason to explain this shared desire to become urbanites. Paralleling with sweeping industrialization of the coastal cities in the 1980s, the economic reform in rural villages "unleashed an enormous tide of rural migrants who swept into the cities in search of work," due to the increased income inequality and different speeds of development between rural and urban China (Rofel 18). In labor poetry, the imagery of Shenzhen symbolizes both hope and

[8] Consolidated by Comrade Deng Xiaoping's famous 1992 South Tour Speech (九二南巡讲话), Shenzhen has been constituted a showcase to Chinese for China's successful reform, promising the newcomers hope and possibilities that simultaneously cater to the deepening of neoliberal reform and expansion of opening..

hopelessness, tied with Chinese migrant workers' strong desire to become urbanites. Returning to Wu's poem, the narrator endorses the bright facet of Shenzhen and the peculiar path toward a "well-off" society promised by the Chinese government, incorporating her urban desires with the rise of China.

This strong desire to become an urbanite has also been elaborated by another famed labor poet Xie Xiangnan (謝湘南, 1974 -), who once had been a migrant worker for ten years in the Pearl River Delta area but now is an editor of *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市報). Distinguished from Wu's monologue voice, Xie writes down how thousands of rural villagers share the same aspiration to "go to the city."

……
Put down the sickles
Lay down the hoes
Leave the kids
Farewell the parents
Sell the livestock
Waste the lands
Get divorced
Let's go to the city

Let's go to the city
We are going to the city
What should we do in the city
Let's talk later after going to the city
……
("A Song during the Long Wait," 22 May 2001, Qin 229)

To express this collective desire to become urbanites, Xie deploys "we" as the narrative voice (as well as Let's) and imitates slogan-like forms commonly used in Mao's period. Although this poem does not identify any concrete individual narrator, images such as sickles, hoes, livestock, and land clearly point to those peasants who live in rural China. From Xie's description, those peasants are also the main characters in the poem who do not have a specific plan about what they can or should do in the city. The only thing they know is to go to the city first, while all other things can be considered afterward. This collective desire to go to the city may sound absurd, but it realistically represents the upsurge of migrant workers in the 1990s.

Without professional training, they are also called the day labor (*mingong*, 民工) who gather in bus stations and plazas, waiting for one-time job opportunities such as becoming a moving helper.

Unfortunately, this shared urban dream without a concrete plan and enough fortune often turns into nightmares, since the migrant workers have to face a series of problems due to their less privileged social-economic status. For instance, despite Wu's optimistic tone in the poem, her positive narration of migrant life is haunted by this conundrum. As the last line of her poem - "my name is absent from her household register" - indicated, most migrant workers in Shenzhen and other big cities live in a precarious condition (such as their inability to obtain a city *hukou*). Additionally, it becomes harder and harder to fulfill their urban dreams due to the extremely low wage, not to mention the wretched working and living environment. From this perspective, Xu Lizhi, in his poem entitled "Rented Room," records the screwed life of migrant workers with a cold and pensive tone in contrast with Wu's rosy voice.

A space of ten square meters
Cramped and damp, no sunlight all year
Here I eat, sleep, shit, and think
Cough, get headaches, grow old, get sick but still fail to die
Under the dull yellow light again I stare blankly, laughing like an idiot
I pace back and forth, singing softly, reading, writing poems
Every time I open the window or the wicker gate
I seem like a dead man
Slowly pushing open the lid of a coffin.
(2 December 2013, Xu 195)

This poem portrays a desperate migrant labor "I" who struggles to live in a coffin-like rented room. Confined within this space of only ten square meters, the narrator feels like a dead man, who has been completely alienated from not only the city and the urbanites, but also other migrants. His life can be characterized by what Kalindi Vora called "a particular form of loneliness, … a form of alienation specific to his work" (55) – an alienated condition to describe call agent labors in Indian. This form of loneliness "can signify a type of social death, … [since the worker has been] cut off from her [/his] own social reproduction through relationships with other people and society in general" (Ibid., 56). Similar to the Indian call agent laborer, Xu's unsentimental portrayal also leads to a deep reflection on the shrunken lives of migrant workers.

However, the lure of urban life still drives many rural migrants flowing into city

desperately. Neither hard work and the coffin-like room nor the precarious living environment can stop the rural villagers' aspirations to go to the city as migrant labors and to dream of becoming urbanites someday. Both Wu Xia and Xie Xiangnan are very lucky, since Wu can live together with her mother while Xie eventually found his dream job and settled down in the city. Even Xu Lizhi who always criticizes the hardship of migrant life, also once expressed his strong wish to stay in Shenzhen and his strong identification with this place. As he said in an interview, Shenzhen is a very desirable place since "[e]veryone wishes they could take roots in the city," enjoying not only material prosperity but also more accessible cultural resources.[9]

This collective yearning to become urbanites precisely explains how the rural migrant workers transform themselves into a type of desiring subjects during the economic reform in the 1980s initiated by China's neoliberal transformation. Cultural anthropologist Lisa Rofel conceptualizes the Chinese desiring subjects who become the novel citizen-subjects that are not only constructed through China's economic reform but also influenced by China's reconfiguration of its relationship to the post-Cold War world structure. Granting the capability to express desire as a necessary skill to become proper cosmopolitan subject, the Chinese, especially the post-cultural revolutionary generation, actively engaged in various cultural practices to speak out their aspirations, needs, and longings (2007). As one important contact zone of these desires, Shenzhen thus occupies an important position in labor poetry. On the other hand, however, it can be a prison of nightmares. Labor poetry in this respect can be interpreted as urban yearnings from the bottom. Although their "desiring subjectivity" is precisely invoked and produced by the neoliberal development, migrant workers are still outsiders of the city, whose yearnings to become urbanites also remain to be marginalized in China's desiring making process.

Becoming subaltern: life as a screw and screwed life

Making a desiring China parallels with the process of globalizing China. When peasants flow into the cities and wish to become urbanized, their urban dreams are intimately entwined with the nation's neoliberal transformation. From Lisa Rofel's perspective, neoliberalism can be conceptualized as "an ongoing experimental project that began in the global south" (ibid. 12) and particularly "a national project about global reordering" in China (ibid. 28). Desire (including aspirations, needs, and longings) therefore becomes a key cultural practice to characterize China's neoliberal reform and national imagination. As she points out, "these

9 https://u.osu.edu/mclc/2014/11/06/the-poetry-and-brief-life-of-a-foxconn-worker/

longings, aspirations, and newly experienced needs articulate with the contradictions and inequalities produced out of neoliberalism in China. They create attachments and active involvement in these [postsocialist] transformations. Novel forms of inclusion and exclusion that arose out of economic reform rested on how its policies captured a wide array of desires produced in part out of the policies themselves" (ibid. 23). In this respect, the desiring practices of migrant workers represented by labor poetry engage in the construction of cosmopolitan subjectivity within the nationalist discourse of revitalization.

At the same time, these utterances not merely raise the question of whose yearnings are recognized in China, but also criticize the increased global inequality embedded in the international division of labor. Gayatri Spivak (2010) deploys the Marxist concept of division of labor to the global context, criticizing the global logic of production that differentiates certain areas/countries as world factories for the consuming purpose of the other areas/countries. This differentiation also leads to the emergence of a global working class, including Chinese migrant workers. As famous Misty poet Yang Lian (楊煉, 1955 -) proposed, the plight of Chinese migrant workers cannot be fully contextualized till they have been connected with globalization and positioned in the bottom of China and the globe (Qin 2015: 452).

Yang may overemphasize a victimized view of Chinese migrant workers, but his proposal points out how miserable their lives could be as workers in the so-called world factories despite their huge contributions, as well as adds a cosmopolitan dimension to their yearnings to become urbanites. For many of them, becoming urbanites does not simply mean to gain a permanent residence in the cities. Rather, it represents yearnings to the modernized lifestyle and cosmopolitan citizenship. For billions of rural Chinese, cities are closer place to experience both modernity and the world. As Shenzhen has been popularized by the Chinese mass media, it is a window city to see and be seen by the world. Yet from the labor poets' descriptions, those aspiring migrants seem to be refused by both the city and the world. For instance, Xu Lizhi often utilizes the trope of screw (*luosi ding*, 螺絲釘) to represent himself and the collective image of migrant workers at large:

A screw fell to the ground
In this dark night of overtime
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
It won't attract anyone's attention
Just like last time

On a night like this

When someone plunged to the ground

("A Screw Fell to the Ground" 9 January 2014)

Xu wrote this condolence poem after his fellow worker in Foxconn jumped to death. Like "a screw fell to the ground" that no one pays attention, nobody will care about a migrant worker's death. Compared other migrant workers with himself as screws, Xu Lizhi describes their screwed lives in many poems. Although they function as indispensable parts to link the country and the city, they ironically have been trashed as dispensable rusty screws.

After imaginings of his death many times through writing, Xu decided to bid a screw-like farewell to the unbearable heavy life by plunging to the ground on the Nationalist Day. His Foxconn comrade Zhou Qizao (周啓早) mourned for Xu's suicide by writing another "screw poem", in which he described Xu as another fallen screw: "The loss of every life/ Is the passing of another me / Another screw comes loose / Another labor brother jumps / You die in place of me / And I keep writing in place of you / While I do so, screwing the screws tighter." ("Upon Hearing the News of Xu Lizhi's Suicide")[10]

The deployment of the screw as a metaphor in labor poetry deserves special attention if one considers its genealogical usage associated with the figure of Chinese workers. In Mao's period, the Screw Spirit (螺絲釘精神, which is also known as Lei Feng Spirit) was once popularized and propagandized nationwide to promote altruism and socialist models in different fields. The well-known song "Follow the model of Lei Feng" (學習雷鋒好榜樣, 1963) also takes this metaphor to praise the socialist virtues such as diligence and self-sacrifice (as shown by the lyrics "willing to be a screw of revolution, 願作革命的螺絲釘"). In such works, the trope of screw glorifies how Chinese people, especially workers and soldiers, function as the indispensable component of the revolution and the nation by working hard in their assigned positions. If the socialist country can be seen as a giant machine, Chinese workers would be the most important screws to ensure its regular operation. During this period, being described as screws was a compliment when the proletarian workers had been seen as a grandeur image – main builder of the country – in literature.

After the Cultural Revolution, the trope of screw was picked by the Misty Poet Liang Xiaobin to convey subjective freeing of lost during the interregnum ("Tale of a screw", 1982). The aspiring young worker in Liang's poem becomes a rusty screw, who is waiting for the verdict. As Liang writes: "The screw is waiting for the verdict / its master is looking ahead /

[10] https://u.osu.edu/mclc/2014/11/06/the-poetry-and-brief-life-of-a-foxconn-worker/

Where is the trash bin / Will I be abandoned / Or be nailed back after scrubbed" (Qin 2015: 8-9). Liang's different usage of the image of screw as workers corresponds to the transitional period toward a post-socialist China. In addition to the social upheaval, Chinese people also experienced post-Mao identity crisis, since no identities other than those dated, empty designations such as educated youth (*zhiqing*, 知青) or socialist workers belong to them. There was also no guaranteed future for them when reform and reconstruction had been permeated from rural village to urban space. During the 1990s, workers in China gradually lost their iron bowls (*tie fanwan*, 鐵飯碗, an idiom describes a guaranteed lifetime job in SOEs before the reform, in which scheme workers' children can replace their parents in factories once they are retired), cradle-to-gravel benefits, and privileged social status. Returning to Liang's poem, although the trope of screw still refers to the image of the workers, it moves attention to how individual worker is perplexed by the unprecedented sociopolitical reforms.

In the writings of labor poets, the role of workers has been further degraded as cheap labor. The trope of screw now is utilized to mourn for the lives of migrant workers as disposable as fallen screws. In fact, the screwed life and everyday violence in workstation predominate Xu's writings as well as Migrant Worker literature as a whole. Driven by the hardship and precarious life condition, imageries such as steel, streamline, urban villages have been repeated from one poem to the other. Despite the fact that migrant workers are highly mobile (as floating population) in reality, the figure of migrant workers in labor poetry is portrayed with physical and psychological immobility, who have been confined in an extremely marginalized position that is "full of working words" such as "workshop, assembly line, machine, work card, overtime, wages". It could be worse for them because:

They've trained me to become docile
Don't know how to shout or rebel
How to complain or denounce
Only how to silently suffer exhaustion
When I first set foot in this place
I hoped only for that grey pay slip on the tenth of each month
To grant me some belated solace
For this I had to grind away my corners, grind away my words
Refuse to skip work, refuse sick leave, refuse leave for private reasons
Refuse to be late, refuse to leave early
By the assembly line I stood straight like iron, hands like flight,

How many days, how many nights
Did I - just like that - standing fall asleep?
("I Fall Asleep, Just Standing Like That" 20 August 2011)

The subaltern figure "I" in this poem represents numerous migrant workers exploited by Foxconn and other world factories, who live like a machine. In comparison with iPhone and other best-selling products assembled by them, they have been treated as disposable commodities and trained to be docile labors completely silenced. Admittedly, this inability to speak is not merely caused by the unequal international division of labor, but also by China's re-worlding agenda, which is in complicit with transnational corporations to attract foreign investments. As Xu writes in another poem, "whether I speak or not / with this society I'll still/conflict" ("Conflict" 7 June 2013). The conflicting existence of migrant workers in China reflects the tensions of rural-urban divisions. While Chinese urbanization and the middle-class lifestyle in the cities have been established by their cheaper labor forces, the urban citizens abhor their presence. It also hints the question of subject formation that signifies both inclusion and exclusion during the building of desiring China, since not all Chinese have the equal right to embrace the novel cosmopolitan subjectivity even after China rises as a new power.

Becoming translocal: neoliberal intimacy in world factories

The marginalized urban yearnings and the exclusion of cosmopolitan subjectivity of Chinese migrant workers — poignantly iterated by Xu Lizhi and many other labor poets — to some extent demonstrate them as birds of passage, constantly migrating between rural hometown and alien cities such as Shenzhen. For many migrant workers, the only way to survive is to swallow the homesickness and precarious feelings of displacement in every day. Take Xu as an example, although he strongly wishes to stay in Shenzhen, he cannot stop his longings to the hometown where he rarely returns. As internally displaced/diasporic subjects (Rojas 2010), Xu Lizhi and other migrant workers are forced to wander between the city they work and countryside they live, but none of those places can be categorized as home. Labor poet Xin You (辛酉, 1981-2011) calls himself a birdman (*niao ren*, 鳥人) who flies back and forth like migratory birds but have been abandoned by both sides. Although they spent most of the year working and living in the city, it is rarely that they can assimilate into the local communities, not to mention obtaining permanent urban residence certificate. At the same time, since most migrant workers return to their hometowns for a couple of days only during the lunar New Year holiday, they become strangers as well when they visit the hometowns in the

countryside(Qin 2015: 317).

This portrayal of the doubly alienated existence of Chinese migrant workers admittedly hints confrontations between countryside and city caused by the rural-urban differences which get wider after the economic reform in China. Yet if one considers China's particular role (as a rising power) in the global context, it might be productive to utilize the figure of Chinese migrant workers and their literary utterances to rethink the concept of intimacy in a globalized political economy.

This intimacy first lies in the translocality of migrant workers. Travelling between home village and host city, Chinese migrant workers engage in a set of translocal process, blurring the boundary between the two. As labor poet Xie Xiangnan writes, migrant workers connect the country and the city with their bodies: "I – numerous I – connect China like the railroad track, drawing the rolls of wheels (Qin 2015: 431-432). In Yingjin Zhang's discussion of translocality in a globalizing China, both migrant workers and transnational business elites represent "highly mobile people," embracing the concept of translocality. It "designates not just the mobility of people but also the circulation of capital, ideas and images, goods and styles, services, diseases, technologies, and modes of communication." More importantly, it "implies multiple sites of identification." Querying some scholars' victimization view of the local, Zhang emphasizes the local's access to agency. From different scales, migrant workers can become translocal and "identification with multiple places of 'being at home'," who gain access to active agency "no matter how intermittently or interstitially, in a world dominated by capital and its attendant development discourse." (8)

Returning to the lines quoted at the beginning of this paper, Xu's poem entitled "Migrant worker" expresses how his past has been packed with the latest model of iPhone and sold to the other shore of the Pacific. In another poem entitled "Carrier" (18 December 2013), Xu reiterates that not only his past, but also his dream has been delivered with the products for selling. (Those dreams of youth, packed with the products / And sold to the other shore of the Pacific, waiting for the next reincarnation). Both poems underscore an ironic contrast between the immobility of migrant workers and the unlimited mobility of the high-tech products such as iPhone, which can be interpreted as charges of global exploitation of the Third World cheap labors. Yet Xu's writings also point out the translocality of these workers and how they have been intimately tied with the rest of the world through free circulation of product, or coagulated form of their labor.

In her inspiring discussion on the "multivalence of intimacy," Lisa Lowe examines the

relatively absent figure of Chinese indentured labor in the historiography, arguing that "the global intimacies out of which emerged not only modern humanism but a modern radicalized division of labor" (2006: 192) . Beyond its salient meaning of domesticity in bourgeois society, Lowe interprets intimacy as "spatial proximity or adjacent connection … as a way to discuss a [colonial] world division of labor emerging in the nineteenth century." (ibid. 193) She further defines a political economy of intimacies beyond domestic sphere in her latest book, addressing "constellation of asymmetrical and unevenly legible 'intimacies'" with considerations of not only dominant notion of intimacy, but also the residual and emergent forms of intimacies (2015: 18).

According to Lowe, the dominant intimacy refers to "sexual and romantic intimacy within and in relation to bourgeois marriage and family," (ibid. 19) while the continued settler practices and afterlife of slavery (such as the Asian Coolie) could be the residual intimacies after the national republics had dominated English society. At the same time, since the term "emergent" refers to an incomplete process of the emergence of new meanings, values, practices, relationships, and other elements in new social and cultural formation (Williams 123), Lowe proposes that in the ongoing residual process, residual elements can be a new emergent formation "articulated by and within new social practices". Therefore "the political, sexual, and intellectual connections and relations among slaves, peoples of indigenous descent, and colonized laborers as an emergent 'intimacies of four continents'" (2015: 19). To put it differently, the transcontinental connections in the colonial past could become a new formation of intimacy emerging in the present.

The concept of intimacy as articulated by Lowe thus overrides the assumption of globalization and neoliberalism as external structures with an *a priori* coherence from modern liberalism. I suggest that intimate encounters between multiple centers and peripheries constitute and situate that which in momentary figurations we might call globalization. It is also not simply a brute binary division, but rather one that operates through precisely spatialized and temporalized processes of both differentiation and connection. The layered intimacies embodied by Chinese migrant workers are also a form of emergent "intimacies of four continents" when the free world market was re-opened after the Cold War. Besides working in the world factories, Chinese migrant workers have established layered intimacies in different scales and toward multiple directions. It could be vertical in megacities like Shanghai, whose emergence as the new financial capital of the world enables encounters between migrant workers from rural China and the other migrant workers, such as elite

businessmen, high-tech and financial talents from overseas. The layered intimacies also established through the aestheticized practices in *Picun* Village (*pi cun*, 皮村, literarily can be translated into the Rubber/Leather Village). Located in the outskirt of Beijing, migrant workers such as Fan Yusu (范雨素) in Picun Village are creating their culture and history in their own words. Yiwu (義烏, in Zhejiang Province), another important hub for Chinese migrant workers is engaging in significant changes: from the wholesale market for daily commodities to an International trade city to China's multicultural city that actively responses to the Belt and the Road initiative. In this busy city, Chinese migrant workers nowadays are neighboring with foreign migrants who could be workers, traders, or merchandizers, practicing a different type of intimacy through differentiation and connection. It may no longer hold the prestigious position as twenty years ago, but Shenzhen still holds its symbolic significance in labor poetry which embodies migrant workers' original dream and the place where that dream begins.

Coda

In the context of post-socialist China, the notion of intimacy has been strategically deployed to fulfill the nation's re-worlding desire. The Chinese dream (中國夢) – a term popularized in the recent five years to address personal dreams of Chinese people that can be shared with the government's goals – emphasizes the affective union between the nation and the people (the Chinese dream/my dream). It can also be understood as a desiring project of revitalizing the nation, which parallels with a process of globalizing China that creates new inclusions and exclusions. In this process, Chinese migrant workers have been relatively marginalized as a global subaltern and excluded from cosmopolitan subjectivity. However, if one considers globalization that operates through precisely spatialized and temporalized processes of both differentiation and connection, these workers actively support the emergent intimacies between various centers and peripheries. The engendered profit from cheap labor has given rise to the cosmopolitan citizenship of an emerging Chinese middle class in the urban sites and China's pivotal economic role after the financial crisis of 2007-2008.

Recognizing Chinese workers as the people of 2009, *TIME* Magazine credits the significant contributions of them and highlighting their barely visible but indispensable role for the global economy: "[To] remain China the world's fastest-growing major economy – and an economic stimulus for everyone else, … the tens of millions of workers who have left their homes, and often their families, to find work in the factories of China's booming coastal cities – in plants like the Shenzhen Guangke Technology Co.'s, just outside Hong Kong, which sits

amid a jumble of snack stands, cheap clothing stalls and old men dragging carts filled with candy to sell to workers on their day off. Near the factory we found some of the people who are leading the world to economic recovery: Chinese men and women, their struggles in the past, their thoughts on the present and their eyes on the future" (Ramzy).

These Chinese men and women are actively participating in the ongoing process of globalizing China, trying to "find their proper niche in the world order as subjects of national (and nationally diasporic) public cultures" (Rofel 29). Among them, labor poets take the form of poetry to get involved, articulate, and constitute whom they are becoming. Three identification trajectories – becoming urban, subaltern, and translocal – has been examined in this paper, and the verse of Chinese migrant workers as well as their identification process of becoming through literary practice need more scholarly intervention, especially when we position these voices in discussions of national literature and transnational articulation. For instance, whether labor poetry can be analyzed in the Sinophone context is an interesting question. On the one hand, it touches upon the question of Chineseness since the population of migrant workers is multiethnic that is composed of both Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. As minority migrant worker, Jike Ayou (吉克阿優, 1985 -) often addresses his life of double alienation. In addition to the alienated experience as a garment worker, he is also alienated from his *Yi* root. On the other hand, when he writes poems in Mandarin, this cultural practice reminds us the linguistic politics of an internal diaspora that has been encountered by Alai (阿來), Zhang Chengzhi (張承志), and many other ethnic minority writers. As Jike wrote: I lie to myself that I'm still *Yi* people, and claim kids are all arrived / I wish ancestors are still here, who can still recognize our old clothes. (The Year of *Yi*)[11]

[11] This poem is retrieved from Jike Ayou's weibo: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a971d2480102vky4.html

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