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No One in Control? China's Battler Poetry

MAGHIEL VAN CREVEL

Abstract:

No literary genre is fully predictable or controllable—but some are more unpredictable and uncontrollable than others, and China's battler poetry is a case in point. In China, up to three hundred million people have left the countryside to flee from poverty and make their way into city life. Exposed to the extreme dynamic of global capitalism, these 'battlers' are the foot soldiers of China's economic rise but not invariably its beneficiaries. Many live and work under gruelling conditions and are deprived of basic civil rights, as second-class citizens in socio-economic and cultural terms. And... they write poetry. Not all of them by any means, but enough for a phenomenon called 'battler poetry' to enter the public eye. What is battler poetry, and what does it do? What happens when dominant logics of ideology, literary aesthetics and cultural expectations encounter the circumstances of battler life? The force field around this poetry is dizzyingly complex and rife with opportunities for disconnect and the unexpected, throwing into sharp relief the randomness that is part and parcel of cultural production.

Keywords: China, migrant workers, battler poetry, *dagong shige*, randomness

No literary genre is fully predictable or controllable—but some are more unpredictable and uncontrollable than others, and China's battler poetry is a case in point. This is my starting point for engaging with randomness as the theme of the BCLA Triennial conference and this special issue.¹

In China since the 1980s up to three hundred million people have left the countryside to flee from poverty and make their way into city life. Usually referred to as migrant workers in English, the most common designation in Chinese of what they do and what they are is *dagong*. *Dagong* roughly means 'working for the boss', doing low-status work and not having control over your destiny in a socio-economic sense (migrant workers are not the only ones who *dagong*, but they are the majority). A suitable English term for the *dagong*-er is the Australian-English 'battler', a colloquial expression for precarious workers that can also be worn as a

badge of pride. China's battlers are the foot soldiers of its economic rise, but not invariably its beneficiaries. Exposed to the extreme dynamic of global capitalism, many live and work under gruelling conditions and are deprived of basic civil rights, as second-class citizens in socio-economic and cultural terms.

And they write poetry. Not all of them by any means, but enough for a phenomenon called *dagong shige* or 'battler poetry' to enter the public eye. We might call this precarian poetry, as a disturbing echo of proletarian poetry, a dyad to which I will return later. Within the category of battler literature at large, poetry is the most high-profile genre. Battler poetry goes back to the 1980s and 1990s, but it really took off in the early twenty-first century. Prominent themes include hardships of migrant worker life such as family separation, exploitation and social exclusion; feelings of displacement, nostalgia and alienation; poverty, hopelessness and the systemic inequality that lurks behind these things.

What is battler poetry, and what does it do? How does battler poetry function in its wider cultural and social ecologies? What happens when dominant logics of ideology, literary aesthetics and cultural expectations encounter the circumstance of battler life? By this I mean the battler's limited access to literary infrastructure but also the ways in which their social experience shapes their poetics. What is their poetry to them, and how does this relate to what others have to say about it?

The force field around this poetry is dizzyingly complex and rife with opportunities for disconnect and the unexpected, throwing into sharp relief the randomness that is part and parcel of cultural production. Part One of this essay trains the spotlight on two individual authors. Part Two reflects on battler poetry at large and the discourse that surrounds it. Part Three reflects on foreign scholarship to date and offers some ideas for future research.

1 TWO AUTHORS

In 2019, Zheng Xiaoqiong's 'Hu Zhimin' had an audience of well over a thousand people spellbound at the Rotterdam Poetry International festival.² Conjoining literature and social advocacy, the poem tells the story of a female migrant worker forced into prostitution. With its mixture of abstraction and hard-hitting detail, 'Hu Zhimin' is vintage Zheng Xiaoqiong. The poem's free verse is marked by a quiet insistence and an unresolved tension sustained by regular pauses that are visible and audible on the page and in Zheng's recitation:³

Hu Zhimin

These years I have been immersed in this colossal era
 and felt weak and powerless with the force of life
 covered in endless, tired denial and ignorance
 Her death shows the trauma of this era
 Three brothers who quarrelled over the compensation money
 and the parents none of them looked after her dead body
 No one grieved and no one wept
 only the ice-cold figure of the money to keep her company
 Hu Zhimin twenty-three death by alcohol
 I have such vivid memories of her
 My one-time co-worker who later at a hotel
 sank into prostitution with her innocent smile loudly talking
 about the ways of the world To me she would say how she had seen
 so many so-called truths of life standing
 on the threshold of reality like desire and the flesh
 She was never embarrassed to talk about what she did for a living
 and about her plans for life From her village alone there were many
 young women who worked in this ancient profession
 The newly married older sisters and younger ones aunts and in-laws
 traveling together to Nanjing or Guangdong...
 to hair salons dimly lit rooms She was born beautiful
 In those hotels high-end places her face radiated
 happiness... We rarely saw each other We came from
 the same background but in the end we lived in different
 worlds In this city at this moment
 two people in this life meeting by chance then parting
 each rushing off in their own direction
 to see if they could change their fate 'She's dead!'
 a man from the village said to me Then told me
 how it happened how much money she had sent to her family
 how they built a beautiful house with it how her brothers had used
 her body's hard-earned money to build a house in the village and set up
 shop
 Then said when she died they never even
 brought the urn home It could not be put in the family grave
 She had sold her flesh a defilement she would bring the family bad luck

Zheng is the face of China's battler poetry. She was born in 1980 in Sichuan province in central China, where she trained as a nurse. In 2001 she migrated to Dongguan in the Pearl River Delta, aka the workshop of the world. She spent most of the following decade as a worker on the assembly line in a string of factories, living on the flipside of the 'Made

in China' label. Displacement, rights deprivation, physically heavy and sometimes unhealthy or dangerous work, low pay, exhaustion (as in being permanently tired but also in the sense of being used up as a human being), with additional risks for women (like disrupted menstruation and sexual harassment by male co-workers and managers). And most of all precarity: Will I have a job tomorrow?

Wanting to become a writer and endowed with the improbable perseverance this requires in such circumstances, Zheng sought mentorship. This was provided by battler poets in the Pearl River Delta and especially by Faxing, a poet and editor based in Zheng's native Sichuan. Zheng's talent was soon recognized and she began to publish. Growing awareness in Chinese society of the social injustice inflicted on migrant workers helped propel her writing into news media and the mainstream literary infrastructure. In 2007, as the recipient of a People's Literature Award, she became famous at the national level. Laid off from factory work in 2008 after the financial crisis, she got an internship at *Zuopin* (*Artworks*), a leading literary journal out of Guangzhou, which led to a steady job as editor. She rose through the ranks to become vice-editor in chief, and her membership of the China Writers Association was converted from the local level to the national. Since the early 2010s, her work has been translated into many languages.⁴

Zheng Xiaoqiong's story shows a meteoric rise to fame. But we should guard against reading this as the logical, predictable outcome of an arithmetic in the sociology of culture that says 'a + b + c = success' and is automatically activated when literary talent manifests itself—where, for example, [a] might be social concern for the battler's plight, [b] might be the mediagenicity of subalternity expressed through poetry, and [c] might be eagerness outside China to see cultural production from the People's Republic as reflecting the hard lot of its citizens. Structural factors such as these matter, but I would venture that Zheng Xiaoqiong's stardom hinges on her individual agency, specifically her skill in negotiating various, sometimes conflicting, forces that would co-opt her for their respective agendas if they could. These include the proponents of angry subaltern solidarity alongside those of government propaganda, mellifluous yet iron-fisted. Thus, Zheng's life and her writing are a site of different projections by different players, an image that fits Heather Inwood's designation of Zheng as a 'poster girl' for battler poetry.⁵ And somehow, Zheng manages to stay above the fray without conceding much in terms of credibility as a voice for the downtrodden.

This projection occurs in a variety of settings, such as Zheng's continued practice as an advocate of (female) worker's rights, government-supported literary workshops, networks of establishment authors and cultural officials, international poetry festivals, and interviews with journalists and scholars. Amidst all this, she displays breathtaking adroitness, stamina, and effectiveness when it comes to remaining her own woman. I note this not just because it is remarkable, but also because it may obscure the complexity of Zheng's story⁶ and that of battler poetry at large—which is exactly what this essay wants to convey.

Lest I contribute further to scholarship's current over-concentration on Zheng Xiaoqiong, inside China and even more so in foreign scholarship and translation, let me introduce a second author before discussing battler poetry at large. Born in 1987, Xiao Hai grew up in the countryside in Henan province. He left school at age fifteen because the family could no longer afford to support his education. Over the next decade-and-a-half, he lived the battler's life, working mostly on the assembly line in a series of factories in southeast and central China. He did not save enough money or make the other requisite moves for finding a partner, settling down, and starting a family. In the early 2010s, to fight the drudgery of this existence and a growing sense of despair, he began to write, motivated by a love of literature and rock music. After trying his hand at classical poetry he switched to the modern, writing mostly in free verse. When he shared his poetry with his co-workers, it was met with incomprehension.

A life-changing moment arrived in 2015 or thereabouts, when Xiao Hai contacted Beijing-based rock star Zhang Chu on social media to express his ambitions as a poet and seek guidance. Zhang put him in touch with Xu Duo, another musician and a founding member of an NGO called the Migrant Workers Home. The Home is based in Picun, a migrant worker village near Beijing with a population that grew from about 2000 to about 30,000 in two decades. It advocates for labour rights and the spiritual well-being of the New Worker (*xin gongren*). 'New Worker' is activist terminology and a politically conscious designation of roughly the same demographic as that denoted by the colloquial 'battler'.

The Home works through what it calls cultural education. One of the grassroots institutions this has spawned, and the Home's calling card, is a folk-rock band called the New Workers Band. They have performed for precarious workers all over China since the early 2000s, with lyrics that directly address the battler experience. Cultural education is also

undertaken in the Museum of Battler Culture and Art, an impressive DIY outfit that documents migrant worker history from below. The museum asserts the battlers' right to dignity, a sense of belonging and recognition of their contributions to society. A third embodiment of the Home's ideals is the Picun Literature Group, a writing community of practice established in 2014 that is sustained through regular volunteer lectures by academics and literary authors, critics and editors. The Group puts out its own publications, starting in 2015 with a series of multiple- and single-author anthologies by and for the Picun community, basically typescripts without much in the way of formatting or design. In 2019 they added a bimonthly journal called *Xin gongren wenxue* (New Worker Literature) that looks a little glossier and is more oriented toward the outside world. These publications partake of the tradition of unofficial (*minjian*) publishing that is a key element of contemporary Chinese poetry, as a crucial alternative to official, state-controlled channels.⁷

Xiao Hai moved to Picun in 2016. He was given work in one of the Home's thrift stores for recycled clothing and as custodian of its library, located inside the Museum, where locals can borrow donated books for free. After he joined the Literature Group, his story was picked up by news media such as *Zhongguo ribao Daily* (*China Daily*),⁸ not least because he is a mediagenic person: gregarious, talkative and hip. Xiao Hai's story combines the gravity of the migrant worker 'problem' (or minimally the 'issue'—the Chinese *wenji* allows for both translations) with the image of the artist as a lonely seeker whose creativity enables the reader's vicarious experience of other worlds, in this case the cruelty of life on the assembly line.

Xiao Hai's writing has evolved over the years. In terms of style, some of his early work is grandiose, exalted, expository. As such, it might count as a bootleg version of Political Lyricism (*zhengzhi shuqing shi*), the often propagandistic, state-sanctioned poetry of the high-socialist era (aka the Mao era), from the 1950s through the 1970s. But the message is starkly different, for Xiao Hai speaks of the misery of the precariat rather than the glory of the proletariat. Some of his recent work has more space for show-don't-tell, for the manipulation of language rather than the outpouring of emotions, and for irony. Below is an excerpt from the long poem *Dang wo kan shijiebei wo kandao le shenme* (When I watched the World Cup what did I see) (2018), an indictment of the global capitalism that has fostered inhuman labour regimes in the Pearl River Delta. The poem is in free verse with long lines and a characteristically raw, breathless feeling to it. The speaker is a Chinese migrant worker watching

the football world cup, whose gaze moves back and forth between the on-screen event many time zones away and his local surroundings (there are good grounds for equating the speaker with the author, hence the male pronoun). He sees a bitter connection:⁹

The first time I stayed up to watch the World Cup
 it was Colombia against England
 Truth be told I don't even know where
 Colombia is on this earth
 But I do know that in Dongguan in the England football outfit factory
 my mates work year-round day shifts and night shifts racing to make those
 jerseys
 [...]
 They make'em by the hundreds thousands millions
 and before they know it they've been at it for many many years
 As for the Colombia jerseys I've made those too in Suzhou
 But the Pearl River delta and the Yangzi delta as the workshop of
 the world
 I only heard about that a couple years ago
 [...]
 Wanda and Adidas and Coca-Cola
 and their million-dollar moving ads on the pitch have nothing to do
 with me
 Youth slipped away is the only thing that is mine
 [...]
 I looked up and out the window
 Two breakfast stalls had set up shop
 As darkness lifted a sleepless bachelor was on a treasure hunt around
 the trash
 [...]
 The losing team left the pitch
 The winners kept doing victory laps
 All that was left was the workers making those jerseys year upon year day
 upon day
 silent and voiceless
 slogging away with no breaks

Zheng Xiaoqiong is a celebrity in China, and increasingly known beyond its borders. Xiao Hai is more of a local hero, and a fringe player for now, but no less important for understanding what battler poetry is and what it does. His poetry and his media persona speak of anger, loss and despair, but also of patriotism and gratitude to the Migrant Workers Home and to the Motherland. Here, complexity resides in the interplay of grassroots cultural practice with the discourse of the state. Grassroots practices

cannot be reduced to resistance vis-à-vis a state-sanctioned culture that can only ever be propaganda aimed at perpetuating the oppression of the individual subject. The realities on the ground are messier and richer.

2 THE UNEXPECTED

The story of battler poetry is that of a genre that is *unexpected*, another approximation of a randomness we keep circling without quite capturing it, with examples from the preceding pages including the unpredictable, the uncontrollable, the illogical, the circumstantial and good clean chance. The arrival of these ‘unlikely writers’, in the words of Ting Chun Chun,¹⁰ compels people to rethink their expectations and agendas as readers, publishers, censors and sponsors, and as critics, translators, scholars and educators – and the discourse that surrounds this literature is accordingly complex. Just like Zheng Xiaoqiong’s individual fame, the provenance and the workings of battler poetry at large will not be captured by ‘a + b + c = success’. In what follows, I will first discuss the writing itself, its authors, and the question of its Chineseness, and then offer some reflections on its representations in literary criticism and news media.

The definition of battler poetry is contested. Is this poetry *by* battlers, *about* battlers, *for* battlers, or *of* battlers not just in an identificatory but also a possessive sense – or is it all or several of the above? For now my position is that battler poetry is by battlers (including former battlers), and about the battler experience. But if this poetry is defined by the social experience of its authors, does that mean it is all the same? And is it really poetry, or is it labour activism with line breaks?

It may not come as a surprise to the reader if I say that battler poetry is no more homogeneous than other literatures by and about oppressed and marginalized groups who claim a voice and aspire to emancipation through writing (women’s literature, queer literature, prison literature, aboriginal literature, etc.). It is easy to list a dozen battler poets you could not mistake for either Zheng Xiaoqiong or Xiao Hai anymore than you could mistake either of these two for the other. But as I am about to add that the latter point is borne out by the two poems presented above, I catch myself. Without more of Zheng’s and Xiao Hai’s poetry on display, aren’t these two poems in fact alike? Isn’t the desire to offer testimony of social injustice central to both? Isn’t what both speakers express most of all solidarity and commiseration with their co-workers (and little in the way of hope)? Aren’t both texts fairly...

unconstrained? Of course one could point to the blanks that punctuate Zheng's text and the long, breathless lines in Xiao Hai's, or to the emphatic *mise-en-scène* from which the speaker operates in Xiao Hai's poem—but some of Xiao Hai's poetry also has blanks in it, and some of Zheng's poetry also has breathless long lines. And in both Zheng's and Xiao Hai's poetry, the speaker takes various shapes: omniscient narrator and advocate of the good cause, observer-*cum*-protagonist, social commentator, autobiographer. Last but not least, if we were to generalize (a useful tool if we want to keep the random at bay), 'unconstrained' would in fact be a term that can defensibly describe battler poetry across the board.

I am not seriously suggesting that the poetry of Zheng Xiaoqiong and that of Xiao Hai are indistinguishable (or, by the way, that we could not play the same trick on two French Symbolists). Rather, I submit that for many of battler poetry's interlocutors, the encounter with this writing can be unsettling because it is overdetermined by the social experience of its authors—which rarely includes education of the kind that helps one to enter the literary field, for instance on rules against big words and sentimentality.¹¹ This can be unsettling inasmuch as battler poetry collides with mental and material aspects of literary and academic infrastructures, including our socialization as academics who study literature and use words like 'unconstrained'. I am aware that the technical observation made through this word in the preceding paragraph is also going to be read as a value judgment in the discussion of relations between social experience and aesthetics, with the nexus of literature and labour as a case in point; and I believe that for battler poetry, representations of the migrant worker community as a 'problem' in Chinese news media raise the stakes of this discussion in terms of ideology and morality. As does the fact that beyond reading and writing, poetry is very much a social practice in China (more on this below).

Moving on now from the writing to its authors, if we proceed from widespread assumptions about the nature of poetry, one might ask if they have the wherewithal to read it and write it. Do these people have the time, energy and motivation to do so—and to do so with the kind of concentration that the genre requires? Do they have the linguistic and literary skills? Do their circumstances allow them to participate in literary communities in meaningful ways?

On time and energy, let me start *in medias res*. Frequently used props for sketching the speaker's workplace in battler poetry include factory order forms and inventory forms, as quotidian manifestations of the

labour regime, in the poetry itself and in paratexts such as interviews. A recurrent image is that of authors writing poetry on the back of the forms, even as they struggle to keep up with the relentless pace of the assembly line.¹² The image shows a spectacular moment of poetic practice that subverts the labour regime, as the forms are turned on their faces to create space for a different ‘product’ than that which the factory wants to produce. But it also shows that the question about time and energy may need rethinking. Paradoxically, it is precisely the relentless, unforgiving labour regime that feeds the urge to stretch oneself even more in order to find time where there is none, to write like there is no tomorrow, as grippingly described by Xiao Hai in his autobiographical essays.¹³

As regards linguistic and literary skills, while the education histories of individual poets vary widely, battler poets are by no means marked by low literacy across the board. The vocabulary and style in Zheng Xiaoqiong’s or Xiao Hai’s poetry are richer and more personal than those in the works of less prominent and little-published authors, but many battler poets have read widely and this shows in their writing. Here, too, there is room to rethink the question. To return to the point about our socialization as academics, can we *not* read ‘unconstrained’ automatically as a value judgment? Or read it as praise rather than blame? And why not? If this poetry appears less precisely wrought, less measured and less perfectly shaped than other writing, that might just be because it was never about precision, moderation and perfection to begin with – which should perhaps lead us to reconsider consensual definitions of poetry rather than conclude that battler poetry falls outside their scope.

Do battler poets’ circumstances allow them to participate meaningfully in literary communities? The answer is a resounding yes. First of all, there is the imagined community around this poetry that formed when internet use became widespread in China, around the year 2000. This community grew rapidly after the arrival of smartphones and social media in the mid-to-late 2000s, facilitated first by blogs and then by social networking apps. Smartphones-plus-social-media have since been a key channel for poetry at large in China and nothing short of essential for battler poetry, which is mostly published unofficially and online.¹⁴ Battler poets and the fellow battlers among their readers also tend to have scant access to mainstream literary infrastructure such as journals, libraries, bookstores, literary events and universities (literature and the academy are deeply entangled in China), and what access they have is shrunk further by their circumstances. Chen Zhongcun recalls being unable to provide a return address when he started sending his

poetry to literary journals before the smartphone had arrived, because as a migrant worker in Shanghai he had no fixed place of residence (makeshift dormitories on construction sites are an icon of the contemporary Chinese cityscape). Smartphones have been game changers for the Chinese poetry scene across the board, but to especially powerful effect for battler poetry.

In addition to this overarching imagined community, many battler poets partake of more specific literary communities, from ephemeral grassroots initiatives to key institutions of the government-sponsored literary establishment. Zheng Xiaoqiong and Xiao Hai are cases in point. Zheng entered the literary field through local and national unofficial poetry networks. She recalls 2003 as a 'watershed' in her explorations of literary writing after Faxing, her mentor, sent her 'vast amounts' of poetry.¹⁵ A few years on, in a milestone anthology that signalled the recognition of battler poetry as a genre, she appears as the first of its ninety-eight contributors.¹⁶ And today, as noted above, she is a ranking editor at *Artworks* and a national-level member of the Writers Association. As for Xiao Hai, in 2019 his visibility as a member of the Picun Literature Group earned him an invitation from the Beijing Lao She Institute for Literature, where he took a course on poetry composition. Thus he bounded from an unofficial, grassroots community to a prestigious, government-sponsored institution within a few years. Reading Zheng's or Xiao Hai's trajectories as simple stories of co-optation would do no justice to the complex dynamic that is at work here.

Battler poets participate in literary communities in meaningful ways, but they need to clear hurdles erected by the displacement and uprootedness that come with migrant worker life, their material circumstances, their scant access to literary infrastructure and their distance from the wellsprings of cultural capital, such as books in the family home or higher education that encompasses training in the humanities. Hence, battler poets need the proverbial lucky break more than other writers and artists in order to make it (aside from the question of what 'making it' means in their context: that Zheng can make a living as a poet and editor is exceptional, and Xiao Hai cheerfully told me that publishing an official collection of his work is unthinkable, let alone earning any money from it).

Zheng's lucky break starts with Faxing's early mentorship and the subsequent patronage of Liu Dongwu, a former battler and self-taught literary scholar well connected with officialdom in Dongguan. The Dongguan municipality funded time off factory work for Zheng to attend

the annual Youth Poetry workshop of the national flagship journal *Shikan* (*Poetry*) in 2005, and to finish her first book in 2006. Xiao Hai's lucky break came with Zhang Chu's response to his unannounced arrival on Zhang's timeline, Zhang's recommendation to Xu Duo, and Xu's invitation to Xiao Hai to move to Picun. There are plenty of stories like this for other authors, which can contribute to a designation of the genre of battler poetry as unexpected.

One could of course object that there is in fact a logic at work here, because Zheng's writing set a trend that made the Dongguan municipality want to put itself on the map in cultural terms, with battler literature as its claim to fame. Or that Zheng's sheer perseverance and her talent for navigating the force field surrounding battler poetry are anything *but* a lucky break, just like Xiao Hai's maniacal commitment to writing against all odds. In another example, if we were to take Xu Lizhi's suicide in 2014 as a macabre specimen of the lucky break because it catapulted his poetry all the way to a prestigious press whose editors might otherwise not have deigned to look at his work, one could object that Xu's death was the 'logical' consequence of his ordeal and his death 'makes sense' as just another chapter in the story of migrant labour in China today. More fundamentally, one could object that personal connections and patronage are not coincidence but constitute the very fabric of the literary scene and its capacity for identifying and nurturing talent.

But on balance, many battler poets' stories highlight how their careers hang together by threads of coincidence, in what is a fragile, unstable literary ecology. For this genre, then, such coincidence comes close to being a signature feature at the individual level, and hence in the larger picture as well. Why is it that we know about Zheng Xiaoqiong and Xiao Hai, and Chen Zhongcun and Xu Lizhi, to stick with the poets I have mentioned so far? Conversely, who are the ones we do not know about, and why is this so? Coincidence of this kind is part of the attraction of literature and art: away from the straight and narrow, from bottom lines and ninety-degree angles, from cause-effect relations that 'make sense', perhaps in order to make room for the random? We can ask such questions of other genres and authors, but they are particularly acute for battler poetry.

Is battler poetry a Chinese phenomenon, beyond the language in which it is written? Inasmuch as it is part of a transnational category of precarian cultural production, the answer is no. Battler poetry is not typically or exclusively Chinese. Eleanor Goodman identifies similarities

between battler poetry and precarian poetry in the US.¹⁷ At the same time, citing Jack Linchuan Qiu and George Steiner, she notes that for poets in China today, who operate in a society where extreme forms of capitalism interact with an ideological commitment to the ideals of communism, the stakes are especially high. I would add that while Steiner portrays the poet as the 'heretical artist' in the context of Stalinism,¹⁸ a broader perspective will also reveal the poet whose writing flows from their position as a government official and who voices loyal dissent, a quality associated with poethood in China since antiquity and embodied in China's archetypal 'first poet', Qu Yuan; not to mention the poet who speaks *for* the ruler rather than against them, such as authors of Political Lyricism in the Mao era like He Jingzhi or Guo Xiaochuan.¹⁹

This perspective will highlight the phenomenon of poetry in China as a firmly rooted social practice (subsuming its political uses among other things) that has endured from antiquity to the present. Textual and extratextual manifestations of this practice change over time, but they consistently show the power of poetry as a meme in cultural tradition in this 'nation of poetry' (*shiguo*): a meme in the pre-internet sense, as a sibling of the gene, as cultural DNA.²⁰ In China, poetry is on the curriculum in formal education, it is common for children to memorize hundreds of classical poems at an early age, and poetry is used in policy speeches and real-estate advertising. This, then, is the environment that brings forth the authors of precarian poetry, and it helps explain why many are so well read and engage with writing so seriously.

Moving on from battler poetry to the discourse that surrounds it, what I have called this poetry's unexpectedness clearly affects its reception in Chinese literary criticism. This includes eulogies of the genre as giving pride of place to the labouring masses, with little room for the downsides of the underlying social dynamic, but it also—and more interestingly—highlights unease and ambivalence. The latter can be traced to the ways in which battler poetry reflects on two other categories on the Chinese poetry scene, to wit 'avant-garde' poetry and 'official' poetry.²¹

As regards the notion of avant-garde (*xianfeng*) poetry, before anything else the reader should forget what this term means in the West. In China, avant-garde poetry is a mixed bag of texts published since the late 1970s that takes its cue from a personal aesthetic experience rather than government policy or the largest common denominator of taste in society, and has been heavily influenced by foreign poetry in translation. Bei Dao remains the best-known avant-garde poet, even

though his generation and their poetics have been joined by a multitude of others. In a nutshell, the avant-garde has reclaimed artistic autonomy for poetry in China after decades of strict political regimentation. By contrast, battler poetry has little use for artistic autonomy if it is to help its authors realize their professed hope of changing their destiny, bearing witness and advancing the battlers' identification as members of a community entitled to recognition and dignity. Hence, avant-garde commentators worry about their poetry once again being 'hijacked' by social reality²² and subjected to 'moral blame', amid indignation over the avant-garde engaging in 'middle-class pleasures' instead of social mobilization.²³ Thus, the emergence of battler poetry has the potential to shift the image of the avant-garde from that of the underdog wriggling free from the grip of the political authorities to that of a spoilt elite that is oblivious to their surroundings and fawns on the foreign; and this plays out against the backdrop of a notable repoliticization of life in China and increasing anti-foreign sentiment under the current administration.

In this respect, again, the force field surrounding battler poetry is highly complex. Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue's 2015 documentary *Wo de shipian* (My Poetry) may serve to illustrate this.²⁴ Their film portrays five battler poets, including the aforementioned Xu Lizhi, who ended his life before shooting for the film had started and whose absence as a living person makes his presence as an icon of battler poetry all the more deeply felt. The film works hard to conjure his image through photographs, an audio recording of his voice on the phone, the reenactment of scenes from his life by his brother, interviews with his grieving parents, and security camera footage of Xu inside the building from which he jumped to his death minutes later. Somewhat scripted and not entirely steering clear of cliché, *My Poetry* mobilizes the powerful mix of the battler's plight with poetry's connotations of romantic fulfillment *and* resistance to injustice. The film followed on the heels of a major anthology of Chinese 'workers poetry' (*gongren shige*) edited by Qin, with battler poetry at the heart of the book.²⁵ Beyond the book and the film, Qin managed to turn *My Poems* into an extended cultural event on social media. Early in 2017, for instance, he hosted a 24-hour talkshow with two dozen different interlocutors (yours truly among them), livestreamed on social media, marketing the event with provocative announcements on the death of poetry – of the avant-garde type, that is.

But Qin's role as a champion of battler poetry and his concomitant dismissal of the avant-garde raises questions. First, because he is an avant-garde poet himself and part of the cultural elite with which

the avant-garde is associated. Second, because of the power relations between the well-resourced filmmakers and their not so well-resourced protagonists, to whose personal lives the filmmakers appear to have had almost unlimited access. They are closely involved, for instance, when Xu Lizhi's brother scatters his ashes at sea (because Xu has killed himself, he cannot be buried in his home village, just like Hu Zhimin in Zheng Xiaoqiong's poem). The entire episode looks carefully scripted by the filmmakers, to the point where an underwater camera sits at the ready to capture the ashes as they flow down amid beautifully refracted sunlight. The film led to acrimonious debate on the poetry scene as people tried to decide whether Qin was fighting for the battlers' cause or using their story to his own advantage, raising issues of authenticity, ownership and appropriation.

Another way of defining the avant-garde is to call it the Other of official (*guanfang*) poetry, meaning orthodox, state-sanctioned writing that aligns itself with government policy. But orthodox commentators are not necessarily more comfortable with battler poetry than their avant-garde counterparts, and their attitude is marked by unease and ambivalence as well, albeit with different motivations. Poetry has been an instrument of politics in China since antiquity, and cultural policy in the Mao era enforced a highly prescriptive poetics. This was meant for the advancement of the working class, of a Maoist proletariat with the workers as masters of their fate, sustained by the iron rice bowl (i.e. social security). The resulting 'workers poetry' celebrated their dignity and political subjecthood, and was deafeningly optimistic. But today the proletariat has been replaced by the precariat, whose atomized subjects are left to fend for themselves amid capitalism at its extreme, the government's professed commitment to socialism notwithstanding. By way of illustration, 'class' (*jieji*) now counts as a politically sensitive word in China. So workers poetry from the Mao era and battler poetry from the twenty-first century are difficult to reconcile.

If we zoom out to the socio-economic big picture, the Chinese authorities are faced with formidable dilemmas generated by the tension between the need for labour and the cost of labour in the most populous country in the world, in an era of accelerating globalization; and there is no doubt that they are deeply concerned about the plight of the battlers. Zooming back in on battler literature, we see cultural officials treading a fine line, sponsoring it on the one hand and censoring it on the other. An example of sponsorship is found in the work of Yang Honghai, a cultural official hired by the Shenzhen municipal government in the mid-1980s,

when the city had begun to industrialize at breakneck speed and faced an overwhelming influx of young precarious workers who basically had no life outside work. Yang worked tirelessly for three decades to promote battler culture, from poetry recitals to body-building contests.²⁶ As for censorship, it is fine for battler literature to ‘speak bitterness’ (*su ku*), a Mao-era term for the airing of grief; but today, this grief may not be attributed to unequal class relations and certainly not addressed through class struggle. Letting off steam is okay but blaming the system is not. Censorship also happens when the picture that is painted is too grim to be acceptable to the authorities. For instance, when battler literature paints truly shocking, inhuman work conditions in ‘black’ (i.e. illegal) factories, coalmines, sex work and so on. In sum, battler literature remains difficult to place for most if not all parties concerned.

3 WORD AND WORLD

Where does foreign scholarship on battler poetry stand? I focus on foreign scholarship because physical proximity and distance to the things we study continue to matter, as do distinctions of linguistic and cultural selves and others, even – or especially – in a globalized world;²⁷ and because Chinese scholarship is bound by rules that are set by the political authorities, especially for sensitive subject matter such as the discontents of migrant labour.

First of all, there is rapidly growing interest in battler literature and other cultural production on and by subaltern subjects in various genres and media such as fiction, theatre, film and digital video, photography, music, museums and community archives.²⁸ At the same time, our libraries are just starting to collect primary and secondary sources, and we are grappling with the question of how to place battler literature and relate it to what has gone before in the Chinese context: Maoist workers literature, for instance, and the left-wing or revolutionary tradition in modern Chinese literature at large.²⁹ Research on battler literature will also benefit from scholarship on other national traditions in ‘working-class’ literature, in scare quotes here because the precariat is having a hard time when it comes to class formation.³⁰ A comparison that looks particularly attractive is that between battler poetry in China and Dalit poetry in India. This could proceed from subalternity as a shared point of origin, and the interfaces of Dalit literature and battler literature carry over into the kinds of questions one can ask of them – and, significantly, into the ways in which this research positions itself in

international scholarship, with the privileged outsider's position of the foreign researcher as one among several important points of discussion.³¹ All this takes us to the perennial question of the relation between word and world, and to the challenge of rethinking that question for battler poetry, with the juxtaposition of social significance and aesthetic value as a recurring flashpoint. Crucially, this begs the question of whose aesthetics we are talking about and what it is the researcher wants from this writing. The answers reflect the choices made by scholars as much as those made by the poets they study.

Work on battler literature and precarian cultural production in China at large comes from social scientists as well as humanities scholars. It employs socio-economic perspectives such as inequality, gender and the environment, but it also has room for broadly human thematics such as the experience of displacement. Some use battler literature in documentary fashion to comment on socio-economic issues,³² as global capitalism and the attendant migration and precarious labour whip up cultural production of this kind across continents, media and genres.³³ Others show the continuing power of close reading, even if battler poetry close-reads differently than Language poetry.³⁴ A perspective that connects much of this research is that of translation, of the interlingual type but also the cultural.³⁵ Personally, I believe that precisely because battler poetry is so palpably circumscribed and overdetermined by the social experience of its authors, the combination of contextually and textually driven research holds great promise. This is because poetry can 'be about' something else – in terms of not just subject matter but also the genre's social connotations, such as speaking truth to power – and yet be about itself and draw attention to itself as an artifact, sitting on the fence between an inevitable rootedness in social reality and art's right to be elsewhere.³⁶ This is what can make poetry at once elusive and powerful, whether it is written in a luxury notebook or on the back of a factory order form.

To reconnect with randomness, it bears noting that foreign scholarship on battler poetry contains an element of contingency itself. This shows in the exposure that individual authors and texts get outside China, compared to their domestic visibility. Poetry that works in one place does not necessarily work in another and cultural brokers on both sides may anticipate its success or failure in this light, rightly or wrongly. This holds for the travels of literature and art at large, but it is reinforced for battler poetry by the degree to which its arrival in languages other than Chinese can hinge on individual networks and

interventions. Fieldwork plays an ambivalent role here. On the one hand, we need ethnographic fieldwork to get at this poetry, more so than for most other literary genres, to work toward a balanced corpus of texts and to scoop up as much of their context as possible, to talk to the authors and to identify and access important parts of the discourse that are not documented in the public domain. On the other hand, ethnography individualizes the landscapes on which it reports. Anthropology has worked hard to mitigate this (and indeed to turn it into an asset), but a type of literary studies that ventures into anthropology could do more in this respect, much of my own work included.

A genre that is unexpected and hangs together by threads of coincidence and lucky breaks, unease and ambivalence in literary criticism, the contingency of fieldwork. . . But none of this bodes ill for scholarship. Of course there are ways to make sense of battler poetry. To return to the question of what it is and what it does, in a recent study I propose the following, interrelated perspectives on what motivates its authors. In tentative order of importance: first and foremost, this poetry works toward social identification, fulfillment, and the restoration of dignity in the precarious worker as a writing and reading subject. Second, it constitutes testimony and advocacy, for the advancement of social justice. Third, it aspires to aesthetic value (which should be assessed with due regard for the question of whose aesthetics, raised above). Fourth, it can suggest an avenue toward the author's socio-economic betterment, although such hopes are rarely realized. Each of these perspectives can involve various actors in addition to the author: anonymous online 'workmate' (*gongyou*) readers, labour activists, literary critics, cultural officials operating on the full range from sponsorship to censorship, media professionals and scholars based in China and elsewhere, and so on.³⁷

This is a start, but the question of how battler poetry functions in its wider social and cultural ecologies—how it works as social practice, as activism, as art—remains highly complex, if only because of the sheer number of players involved with this poetry and the entanglement of their respective interests. In addition to the usual suspects in the literary field, these include NGOs like the Migrant Workers Home, the state as socio-economic policymaker but also as sponsor and censor of literature, the unofficial poetry scene, and news media in China and elsewhere whose contributions far exceed the culture pages. In China, news media work to align this poetry with their preferred view of the nation's character and its development, captured in the positive energy of

the motivated citizen.³⁸ Outside China, certainly in the West, news media do the same thing, except that they tend to emphasize the oppression of the individual subject.³⁹

Back to that good old question. Is this poetry, or is it labour activism with line breaks? This is a false dichotomy. There is no need to choose. In the context of the BCLA Triennial conference on Randomness, there is an inspiring parallel with the false dichotomy of disciplines and area studies, and I was especially grateful for the invitation in my capacity as a card-carrying sinologist. Speaking of which, there is no need to claim battler poetry for literary studies. Humanities scholars with some tolerance of social science and vice versa are well positioned to mine and ponder this writing for understanding a variety of things including China, poetry and everything in between. Battler poetry can feed into fields of inquiry that range from migration studies, labour studies and history to media and communication studies and to cultural studies and translation studies—and who knows, maybe even Chinese studies. With no one in control, signifying not just randomness but plurality and diversity in scholarship.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Francesca Orsini for her incisive feedback on an earlier draft of this essay. The essay draws on a book that is under construction and on ethnographic field notes, and addresses a reader who is not necessarily a China specialist. To this end, it recombines some of my findings in draft chapters that have appeared as journal articles in Chinese and Asian studies platforms or are under review there. These include a review essay on *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*, edited by Qin Xiaoyu and translated by Eleanor Goodman, and *Iron Moon*, directed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue, MCLC Resource Center (2017), <edu.nl/pxvg7> [all websites were accessed 13 June 2021]; 'The Cultural Translation of Battlers Poetry (*Dagong shige*)', *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, 14.2/15.1 (2017), 245–286; 'Walk on the Wild Side: Snapshots of the Chinese Poetry Scene', MCLC Resource Center, <edu.nl/gkkmy>; 'Debts: Coming to Terms with Migrant Worker Poetry', *Chinese Literature Today*, 8.1 (2019), 127–145; 'Misfit: Xu Lizhi and Battlers Poetry (*Dagong Shige*)', *Prism: Theory and Chinese Literature*, 16.1 (2019), 85–114; and 'I and We in Picun: The Making of Chinese Poet Xiao Hai', currently under review.
- 2 For a video recording of Zheng's reading, see <edu.nl/kcf3j>.
- 3 Zheng Xiaoqiong, *Nügong ji* (Guangzhou: Huacheng, chubanshe 2012), pp. 167–168. All translations are my own.

- 4 See the MCLC Resource Center section on translations by author at <edu.nl/xwb6u>.
- 5 Heather Inwood, 'Between License and Responsibility: Reexamining the Role of the Poet in Twenty-First-Century Chinese Society', *Chinese Literature Today*, 2.1 (2011), 49–55 (p. 53). Not all Zheng's work counts as battler poetry, but her other writing lies outside the scope of this essay.
- 6 See, for example, Xiaojing Zhou, 'Zheng Xiaoqiong', in *Chinese Poets Since 1949*, DLB 387, edited by Christopher Lupke and Thomas Moran (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2021), pp. 330–336.
- 7 See 'Related content' for 'Unofficial Poetry Journals from China', Leiden University digital collections, <edu.nl/k9type>.
- 8 Yang Yi (director), 'Wo ba liushuixian xiecheng shi', in *Zhongguo ribao*, 19 August 2019, <edu.nl/398pv>.
- 9 Xiao Hai, 'Dang wo kan shijiebei wo kandao le shenme', *Gongyou zhi jia Picun wenxue xiaozu zuopinji* 08 (2018), pp. 80–82 (unofficial).
- 10 Ting Chun Chun, 'Writing Literature in a Collective: The Experience of the Picun Literature Group', manuscript.
- 11 Eleanor Goodman, 'Translating Migrant Worker Poetry: Whose Voices Get Heard and How?', *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, 14.2 (2017), 107–127 (p. 118–119). Goodman is the translator of *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*, edited by Qin Xiaoyu (Buffalo, NY: White Pine, 2016), a key collection of battler poetry in English translation.
- 12 E.g. Teow Lim Goh, 'Eleanor Goodman', *Canopy*, 25 February 2018, <edu.nl/abd4m>; Mark Nowak, *Social Poetics* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2020), p. 233; Zhou, 'Zheng Xiaoqiong', p. 331.
- 13 Xiao Hai, 'Wo zai chejian li xie shi', Phoenix Web, 20 December 2019, <edu.nl/8rmee>.
- 14 Heather Inwood, *Verse Going Viral: China's New Media Scenes* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), chapter 1.
- 15 Jiang Guangping, 'Wo buduan tansuozhe shiwu yu yuyan de kenengxing' (interview with Zheng Xiaoqiong), *Wenxue qianyan*, 6 (2015), 97–110 (p. 100).
- 16 Xu Qiang, Luo Deyuan, Chen Zhongcun, eds, *1985–2005 nian Zhongguo dagong shige jingxuan* (Zhuhai: Zhuhai chubanshe, 2007).
- 17 Eleanor Goodman, 'Poetry, Translation, and Labor', in *Chinese Poetry and Translation: Rights and Wrongs*, edited by Maghiel van Crevel and Lucas Klein (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 45–67 (pp. 61–65).
- 18 George Steiner, *George Steiner: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 53.
- 19 See for instance Laurence A. Schneider, *A Madman of Ch'u: The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); and Xin Ning, 'Political Lyric', in *Words and Their Stories: Essays on the Language of the Chinese Revolution*, edited by Ban Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 119–134.
- 20 Inwood, *Verse*, and van Crevel, 'Walk'.
- 21 van Crevel, 'Walk', pp. 30–46.
- 22 Luo Xiaofeng, 'Bei xianshi bangjia de xin shiji shige', *Wenyi pinglun*, 6 (2016), 25–33.
- 23 Qian Wenliang, 'Daode guizui yu jieji fuzhou: fansi jinnian lai de shige piping', *Jiangnan Daxue xuebao*, 26.6 (2007), 5–11 (p. 26).

- 24 *Wo de shipian*, directed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue (Shanghai: MeDoc and Shanghai Eternity, 2015).
- 25 Qin Xiaoyu, ed., *Wo de shipian: dangdai gongren shidian* (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2015).
- 26 See for instance Yang Honghai, ed., *Dagong wenxue beiwanglu* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2009).
- 27 van Crevel, 'Walk'.
- 28 Witness the bibliography on migrant workers and subalternity at the MCLC Resource Center, <edu.nl/n7hgr>.
- 29 See for instance Charles Laughlin, 'The Revolutionary Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*, edited by Kam Louie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 218–234.
- 30 E.g. Gustav H. Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working Class Writing* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1985) and John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, eds, *A History of British Working Class Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), on the UK; and Nicholas Coles and Paul Lauter, eds, *A History of American Working-Class Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), on the US.
- 31 See Nicole Thiara and Judith Misrahi-Barak, 'Editorial: Why Should We Read Dalit Literature?', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54.1 (2019), 3–8 (p. 7).
- 32 E.g. Wanning Sun, *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), chapters 7 and 8.
- 33 See for instance Joseph Entin, 'Globalization, Migration, and Contemporary Working-Class Literature', in Coles and Lauter, *A History*, pp. 376–391.
- 34 E.g. Margaret Hillenbrand, 'Declaimers and Ventriloquists', manuscript.
- 35 E.g. Goodman, 'Translating' and 'Poetry', and van Crevel, 'The Cultural Translation'.
- 36 Maghiel van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 337.
- 37 van Crevel, 'I and We'.
- 38 E.g. Yang, 'Wo ba'.
- 39 E.g. Emily Rauhala, 'The Poet Who Died for Your Phone', *TIME*, 8 June 2015, <edu.nl/mmjta>.