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Vulnerable yet resilient: representations of migrant workers in contemporary Chinese prose

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VULNERABLE YET RESILIENT:
REPRESENTATIONS OF MIGRANT WORKERS
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PROSE

Shuang Liu

Cover design by Shuang Liu

Cover illustration: the cover features an image of a river flowing between the countryside and the city, symbolizing the fluidity and mobility of migrant workers.

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Vulnerable Yet Resilient:

Representations of Migrant Workers in Contemporary Chinese Prose

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In 1988

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献给我的父母，刘付章和魏秀兰

To my parents, Fuzhang Liu and Xiulan Wei

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Conventions

This study uses the Hanyu Pinyin system of Romanization for Chinese names and terms. Chinese characters are provided at first mention of personal and institutional names, important Chinese terms, and the titles of literary works. Only when a term or name recurs prominently at distinct intervals throughout the text are the characters provided more than once. In addition, all characters used are found in the glossary. In transcribing personal names, I follow the Chinese custom of placing family names before given names.

All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Preface

Growing up in a rural region of Henan province, the heartland of China, I kept hearing about *dagong* 打工. *Dagong* means to work for the boss, to sell your labor, and it often means you do so as a precarious worker in a place that is far away from home: in manufacturing, construction, service jobs, and so on. The expression felt both familiar and unfamiliar. Many individuals I knew, including neighbors, relatives, and high school classmates who dropped out, left their hometowns to *dagong* in the cities, as migrant workers in southern China. So I knew what *dagong* was all about: as an idea, from a distance. Then, after completing my undergraduate studies, I ventured to a factory in the south for two months of summer employment in my turn, in the summer of 2011. I became a *dagong*-er myself. This was an entirely new experience, and an encounter with the world behind the word: the hot and humid summer, the huge factory grounds, workshops with automatic temperature control, assembly lines strewn with electronic components, dustproof work clothes, the worker community—all these elements of the actual *dagong* experience were new to me.

I worked for two months and earned nearly 5,000 yuan (around 625 euros). This income was considered quite high. In 2011, my annual tuition fee in college was 3,400 yuan (around 425 euros), and the cost of my living for a year was around 2,500 yuan (around 300 euros). In other words, if a college student from a central province went to the southeastern coastal area for a summer job for two months, they could almost cover their annual tuition and living expenses. During that time, the most profound impressions I had of migrant labor were the economic benefits it brought and the differences in climate and cuisine between the southern city and my hometown.

After my brief firsthand experience as a migrant worker came to an end and I returned to university, I continued to encounter various narratives and stories about the lives of migrant workers. Indeed, as someone born in rural Henan, I have come to realize that no matter where I am or what kind of job I do, as long as I maintain a connection with my hometown, the stories of migrant workers will always find their way to me—it remains a central topic of discussion among the people from my hometown. In our village, people would often discuss and envy the

newly constructed buildings owned by those who had worked as migrant workers. There were also occasional gossip and discussions surrounding female migrant workers, suggesting they might be “contaminated” by going out into the world. Particularly during the Spring Festival, TV programs would broadcast images and videos of migrant workers carrying bags of all sizes, returning home by train from the southern regions to celebrate the New Year. These diverse pieces of information about *dagong* came from different sources and offered varying perspectives, sometimes aligning with my own experiences and sometimes contradicting them.

As I matured and gained more life experience, not just in China but also in the US and in the Netherlands, my brief migrant worker experience became increasingly captivating, prompting me to revisit it time and again. Why was my first job *dagong*-ing in the south? Would other opportunities have been available if I had chosen to stay in my hometown? Moreover, as I grew more aware of the bigger picture around *dagong*—one way of summarizing this would be global capitalism and its discontents, extending to China as the “workshop of the world”—I began to contemplate why my memories of that time primarily revolved around the sweltering heat in the south and the wages I earned, rather than the grievances voiced by my older colleagues. They would express concerns regarding the toll of night shifts on their health, their longing for their children back in their hometowns, the sacrifice required to realize their aspirations to save money for constructing houses or initiating businesses, and a multitude of other, fundamental challenges.

In a nutshell, *dagong* has remained unfamiliar to me in many ways, as the stories of migrant workers I know and my own experience as a summer migrant worker have left many questions unanswered, further fueling my curiosity. But then I turned to literature to seek answers. In 2019, eight years after my brief migrant worker experience, I decided to study Chinese migrant worker literature, popularly known in China as *dagong* literature: a striking and hotly contested new genre that has quickly and firmly established itself over the last several decades. While this topic originated from my personal experiences and curiosity, this doctoral dissertation extends far beyond addressing individual questions and concerns. I hope it will advance our understanding of migrant worker literature and (Chinese) literature at large—and of contemporary Chinese society, where opportunity, hardship, and representation are entangled in fascinating ways.