



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Liu, S.

Citation

Liu, S. (2024, December 3). *Vulnerable yet resilient: representations of migrant workers in contemporary Chinese prose*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4170525>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 1

Introduction

China has been known as the “workshop of the world” since the late 20th century, and countless consumers all over the world have been purchasing and using products “made in China” for decades. But what do they know about the people who made these products? Along with construction workers, the makers of goods made in China constitute a core group within the nearly 300 million internal rural-to-urban labor migrants whose cheap labor has enabled China’s economic rise amid a globalized ecology of consumption. Even as their labor enters the lives of others worldwide, they essentially remain strangers to the average store customer. Who are these people?

This study asks how China’s migrant workers are represented in *literature*, as distinct from various other discourses. Addressing this question will give us a better understanding of China’s internal migrant workers, Chinese society, global capitalism – and last but not least, of Chinese literature. Below I will first provide some background information on China’s migrant workers and then elaborate on my project.

1. Background: China’s internal migrant workers and migrant worker literature

1.1 *China’s internal migrant workers*

According to 2023 data from The National Bureau of Statistics of China, the total number of internal migrant workers in China in 2022 was 295.62 million¹, or about one fifth of China’s

¹ 中国国家统计局 [The National Bureau of Statistics of China]. 2023. “2022 年农民工监测报告” [2022 Annual Report on Migrant Workers], https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/zxfb/202304/t20230427_1939124.html.

population. This massive internal rural-to-urban migration started in the late 1980s, propelled by China's rapid modernization and urbanization in the Reform era (since 1978). Countless farmers have flocked from the countryside to towns and cities in search of jobs. They are China's internal migrant workers, also known as “*dagong*” people in Chinese (*dagong zhe* 打工者, *dagong ren* 打工人, etc). *Dagong*, which literally means “working for the boss”, as in selling one's labor, is a term that denotes fundamental socioeconomic insecurity, and closely associated with rural-to-urban migrants who work precarious manual jobs that require long hours but offer low compensation. Migrant workers are mainly young people with an educational background of junior high school; they are mainly employed in manufacturing, construction and service industries (Bai and Li 2008). They have become a significant economic force in the past few decades but many are stuck at the “bottom” (*diceng* 底层) of society, with little in the way of civil rights.

Migrant workers are a “disadvantaged social group”² in China, and there are historical reasons for this. In 1958, with the enactment of the “Regulations on Household Registration of the People's Republic of China”, the Chinese government introduced strict regulations and governmental controls on the free movement of the population. This marked the first time that urban and rural residents were classified into two distinct types of “household registration” or *hukou* (户口): agricultural and non-agricultural, with the latter usually meaning an urban household registration. The dual social structure that results from this institutionalization of the urban-rural divide has been a fundamental feature of Chinese society, with urban residents enjoying significantly better living standards and social welfare benefits (e.g. access to health insurance, education, the housing market, etc.) than their rural counterparts. The household registration system is highly segmented, and only a small percentage of farmers have been able to obtain urban household registration through channels such as education or military service (Tan 2007: 61). The disparity in economic and social resources between urban and rural areas has perpetuated discrimination against farmers.

² For instance, China's premier Li Keqiang chaired an executive meeting of the State Council on December 4, 2019, during which he acknowledged that “migrant workers are a disadvantaged group in society and their earnings from *dagong* constitute their primary source of income.” (https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2020-01/07/content_5467278.htm).

In 1978, after the high-socialist era and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Chinese government initiated sweeping economic reforms and partially embraced market economy principles. This move was accompanied by the relaxation of stringent restrictions on population movement between rural and urban areas, in order to drive the country's urbanization and modernization agenda. Consequently, a vast number of rural people have flocked to towns and cities since the 1980s in search of employment opportunities and socioeconomic betterment at large. However, despite the loosening of population movement restrictions, the household registration system remains rigid even today, particularly in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, where rural migrant workers are often denied civil rights. They are frequently derogatorily referred to as “peasant-workers” (*nongmingong* 农民工), further highlighting their in-between social status: gone from their rural home, but not really “arrived” at their urban destination, they are stuck between the places they have left but unable to find anchorage in the cities that merely want them for their labor.

To be sure, internal migration has not just been a tale of suffering but also one of opportunity and social advancement for many, at least in absolute numbers – but the overall picture is one of a social group that is structurally faced with a formidable social and economic challenges and hardship.

1.2 Representations of migrant workers in government discourse, social science, news media, and migrant worker cultural production

Migrant workers are referred to in various ways by various parties, including themselves, use a variety of terms, such as the aforesaid *nongmingong* ‘peasant-workers’ (often translated as ‘migrant workers’), *liudong renkou* 流动人口 ‘the floating population’, *laowugong* 劳务工 ‘casual laborer’, but also *mangliu* 盲流 ‘the blind flow’, *dagongzhe* ‘people working for the boss’ or ‘battlers’ (and often translated as ‘migrant workers’ as well), and *xin gongren* 新工人 ‘new workers’. These various appellations and the stories in which they appear are part of a rich and often value-laden public discourse, which shapes public perceptions and attitudes towards this group. Drawing on previous scholarship, this section aims to provide a broad-strokes overview of representations of migrant workers in government discourse, in social science, in the news media, and in migrant worker cultural production other than literature; subsequently, we will turn to literature in the next section.

The representation of migrant workers in government discourse mainly manifests in government rules and regulations on rural migrants, which deeply affect their social experience. Analyzing China's household registration policy since 1949³, Guo Dongjie 郭东杰 (2019) holds that China's household registration system has undergone a complex process: from strict restrictions on migration to gradual liberalization of mobility, and finally to promotion of the urbanization of migrant workers in cities. According to Guo, from 1950 to 1977, the household registration system was built up, and population movement was gradually restricted. From 1978 to 1999, the government's embrace of a market economy propelled large-scale population movements, and problems generated by the household registration system began to emerge. During this phase, the government relaxed restrictions on population movement, but on-the-ground management remained strict, especially in cities of the southern coastal economic zones, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, where the local government required migrant workers to carry various documents that could be used to check their identity, such as the "temporary residence permit" (*zanzhu zheng* 暂住证), "floating population permit" (*liudong renkou zheng* 流动人口证), "local guarantee" (*dibao* 地保), etc. (Zou and Ning 2018). Migrant workers without these documents were regarded as factors of social instability, captured in the image of the "blind flow," mentioned above, and they could be subjected to financial punishment and, in practice, physical torture at the hands of the municipal authorities⁴ (Florence 2006).

Since 2000, in order to alleviate the imbalance between urban and rural development, the household registration system has been relaxed and rural-to-urban integration has been accelerated, especially in third- and fourth-tier cities⁵ (although the household registration system

³ Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the government has progressively tightened the regulation of population movement. The introduction of the "Regulations on Household Registration of the People's Republic of China" in 1958 represented a significant milestone in establishing a rigorous system for population mobility.

⁴ In reality, discrimination and prejudice against migrant workers is broader, irrespective of their possession of proper documentation.

⁵ These cities are generally smaller in size and have a more limited range of economic activities compared to higher-tier cities. They often serve as administrative centers for surrounding rural areas. Examples include Jiaxing, Yichang and Jinzhou. The tier system provides a general framework for understanding the relative economic development and significance of cities in China.

in major cities is still very strict, as noted above). During this period, there have been no clear restrictions on population movement, and documents such as temporary residence permits that limited the rights of migrant workers have been abolished⁶. The government no longer primarily viewed migrant workers as a destabilizing factor in society but instead recognized their economic contributions. The government also began to acknowledge the difficulties faced by migrant workers and see them as a disadvantaged social group, and even pushed for legislation to protect their rights⁷, but with limited success in practice. In addition, access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and other services for migrant workers still lag far behind those of urban residents. It is worth noting that although the government policies are shifting towards improving the situation of migrant workers, the derogatory term “peasant-workers” continues to be used in government documents to refer to migrant workers, which vividly illustrates the gap between government rhetoric and social reality.

China-based and foreign-based social scientists have conducted extensive research on social issues related to migrant workers, covering a wide range of topics including their living conditions, employment, social integration, health, education, and cultural identity (e.g. Li 2012, Yan 2008, Sun 2014a). Overall, social science discourse also represents migrant workers as a disadvantaged social group, and shows that migrant workers in China face many challenges and obstacles, such as low wages, poor working conditions, limited access to social services, discrimination, and lack of legal protection (e.g. Li 2012, Liu 2017, Xu 2015, Murphy 2002, Jacka 2006, Yan 2008).

Interestingly, studies conducted by China-based and foreign-based scholars show different emphases. When addressing issues related to migrant workers in China, scholars based in China tend to focus on practical solutions, while foreign-based scholars tend to delve into the deeper political, economic, and cultural roots of social inequality. China-based scholars often act as mediators, making policy recommendations to help improve the situation of the migrant

⁶ Following the Sun Zhigang incident (the migrant worker Sun Zhigang’s 2003 death in Guangzhou due to physical abuse he endured while being held under China’s custody and repatriation system), Premier Wen Jiabao announced the system’s elimination on June 20, 2003, with effect from August 1. (<http://old.lifeweek.com.cn//2003/0715/5957.shtml>).

⁷ For example, in 2019, the State Council promulgated the “Regulations on Guaranteeing the Wage Payment of Migrant Workers” (https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2020-01/07/content_5467278.htm).

workers. They tend to emphasize the government's role in improving migrant workers' rights, including the provision of technical training services. For instance, Xu Qinxian 徐勤贤 points out a disparity between the policies provided by the government and the needs of migrant workers, and thus suggests that the government should improve urban public service facilities to cover migrant workers and their families (Xu 2015:8). Sociologist Li Qiang 李强 examines the issue of migrant workers from the perspective of social stratification and concludes that household registration reform alone cannot solve all the problems associated with migrant workers' integration into the city. He recommends implementing a fair mobility mechanism, such as providing vocational skills training and certification for migrant workers, so that migrant workers can acquire better-paying jobs based on their skills and integrate more smoothly into the city (Li 2012:235).

Conversely, foreign-based scholars tend to view the situation of migrant workers as a result of the joint forces of government and capital (Pun 2005:25) and express less trust in the Chinese government. They encourage migrant workers to recognize their class status and fight for their rights (Sun 2014a, Pun 2016). Overall, these scholars offer different perspectives on the complex issues affecting migrant workers. Complementary to work done by China-based scholars, their work can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this global phenomenon.

These social science studies are of importance to my research on literature, as they provide valuable insights from different perspectives and often advance my understanding of literary representation. In the core chapters of this study, I will regularly point out the differences between literary and social science representations, and at the same time draw on conclusions from social science research in order to deepen my understanding of literary representation.

Government discourse and social science discourse have also influenced the media, especially news media's representation of migrant workers. For example, Éric Florence's study (2006) focuses on the ways in which migrant workers were represented in the late 1980s and early 1990s mainstream newspapers. By analyzing how the term "blind flow" first becomes prevalent and then vanishes in mainstream newspapers, he argues that the central issue is the legitimacy of the migrants' presence in the cities (Florence 2006:24). This observation also reflects that in the late 1980s, migrant workers were often associated with urban disturbance. Similarly, by researching on two magazines that are dedicated to female migrant workers,

Farmer Girls (*Nongjianü* 《农家女》) and *Women Migrant Workers* (*Dagongmei* 《打工妹》), Tamara Jacka finds that these magazines promote a “[human] quality” (*suzhi* 素质) discourse that essentially holds migrant worker girls responsible for their own misfortune, because of their low education level, insufficient social experience, lack of self-protection awareness, etc (Jacka 2006:57). Florence’s subsequent work (2007) continues to analyze the representation of migrant workers in Shenzhen newspapers. He points out that in the later 1990s, mainstream discourse affirms the contribution of migrant workers and even establishes them as an example of the ability to work hard and self-reliance (compared with workers laid off from state enterprises who are portrayed as narrow-minded and choosy), but essentially still covers up the fact that they are being exploited (Florence 2007:89). This is consistent with a similar shift in the description of migrant workers in government policy.

National newspapers typically align with government documents, but local newspapers may have more leeway in their reporting. This can result in more negative news coverage and stereotypical depictions of migrant workers. For instance, Li Mingwen 李明文 and Bo Ruhui 柏茹慧 point out that the national newspapers, newspapers that cater to particular professional sectors, and urban newspapers adopt different patterns in reporting when it comes to migrant workers (Li and Bo 2017:22). Among them, in the local *Yangcheng Evening News* (*Yangcheng Wanbao* 《羊城晚报》), the proportion of negative reports on migrant workers reached 25.3% (Li and Bo 2017:25). Similarly, through a comparative analysis of various reports on migrant workers, Zhang Peng 张鹏 finds that the news media's representation of the migrant workers has become stereotyped. Stereotypical representation by the media, Zhang argues, is in stark contrast to the richness of migrant workers’ actual lives, which indicates the indifference of the media to the real-life struggles and survival of migrant workers (Zhang 2007:47).

In summary, the general representation of migrant workers in news media is not static but a dynamic process. Although there have been more positive descriptions in recent years, overall migrant workers are often still portrayed in the media as low-skilled, uneducated, and even dangerous, perpetuating negative stereotypes that contribute to discrimination and social exclusion. This has further reinforced their marginalization in Chinese society (Li and Bo 2017:25; Zhang 2007:47).

Representations of migrant workers in government discourse, social science publications, and news media as outlined above provide the background for the following reflections on migrant worker cultural production, by which I mean cultural production (other than literature, to which we turn below) by and/or about migrant workers. In the following, I focus on (1) commercial TV dramas and films, (2) independent film and documentary, (3) music and other performing arts.

Scholars have expressed concern about the representation of migrant workers in commercial TV dramas and films, arguing that migrant workers are commodified as part of what amounts to a cover-up for real social problems. For example, Sun Wanning's 2009 book *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries* studies how domestic workers are represented in TV dramas and urban newspapers. She argues that media representations of maids fuse social inequality between different classes to a moral discourse while overlooking the social relations that condition this inequality (Sun 2009:60). Similarly, through examining two TV dramas, *Nannies for Foreigners* (*Shewai Baomu* 《涉外保姆》) and *Girls from out of Town* (*Wailaimei* 《外来妹》), Amy Dooling points out that “the conflicts between the maid and her employers tend to be framed not in terms of socio-economic difference or class antagonism but a gap in modern knowledge and qualities between rural and urban subjects” (Dooling 2017: 140). Justyna Jaguścik argues that in the middle of the 1980s, when female migrant workers emerge as protagonists in popular films and television dramas, their representations do not offer them much agency: “for blue-collar women, becoming part of the popular culture does not necessarily lead to the emergence of novel mass subject identifications” (Jaguścik 2011:121).

Independent film and documentary about migrant workers offer an alternative narrative to mainstream government and media narratives. For instance, examining how rural migrant workers are represented in Chinese independent documentary films, Florence (2018:267) argues that by using the long sequences that leave ample time for migrant workers' narration, the independent documentary films, with a bottom-up perspective, offer an alternative narrative to the paternalistic and sometimes voyeuristic mainstream narrative. Dror Kochan (2009:285) points out that visual representations (including independent films, paintings, performance art, and photography) of internal migration created by a cultural avant-garde has provided an “alternative discourse” with a more sympathetic view toward migrant workers compared to the mainstream discourse. However, Sun (2012a:98) claims that although independent films may

differ from mainstream media in that they take the space to address sensitive or “troubling” subject matter, they do not automatically represent individual or collective migrant workers’ points of view. She notes that migrant workers have also themselves taken up the digital camera to document their own lives and work, so as to create a real alternative perspective to the dominant culture, and that this is not an easy task.

In her 2014 landmark book, *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*, Sun further argues that documentaries/photographic works created by migrant workers themselves (after the popularization of photographic equipment and mobile phones), may provide an alternative discourse to representations of migrant workers by mainstream media that operate in a force field that was shaped by the then administration’s slogan of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会). But she suggests that the influence of migrant workers’ self-representations will not affect social change unless they are perceived as interesting by a substantial audience (Sun 2014b:130). To a certain extent, independent films and documentaries about migrant workers share similarities with the migrant worker literature that I will discuss below. While they may belong to different cultural forms, they both provide alternative narratives that deviate from mainstream government and media portrayals. At the same time, as Sun has pointed out, their social efficacy in effecting substantial social change remains limited.

In addition to commercial TV dramas and films and to independent films and documentaries, migrant worker cultural production also includes music and other performing arts. The most famous of these is a band that is best known as the New Workers’ Art Troupe (*Xin gongren yishutuan* 新工人艺术团: formerly known as the Young Migrant Workers’ Art Troupe, it has since gone through several name changes). It was founded on May 1, 2002, in Picun, near Beijing and is part of the Migrant Workers Home (*gongyou zhi jia* 工友之家), a non-profit grassroots cultural organization initiated by migrant workers themselves to provide cultural and educational services to the migrant worker community (Cui 2013, Yin 2020, Van Crevel 2019, Van Crevel 2023, Zhong 2023). The band’s core members originally came to Beijing in the late 1990s in hopes of “making it” as musicians and entertainers. In 2004, they released an album “All Migrant Workers Are One Family” (*Tianxia dagong shi yijia* 《天下打工是一家》), which included twelve original songs. Scholar Li Yunlei 李云雷 states that the music of the New Workers’ Art Troupe is people’s music; it comes from migrant workers, it is made by migrant

workers, and it is meant for migrant workers. Their musical performance is meaningful, Li writes, in that it articulates the aspirations of China's subaltern people during a social transition period and tries to change social relations (Li 2005:68). Another cultural practice of the New Workers' Art Troupe is to organize the annual "Migrant Worker Spring Festival Gala" (*Dagong chunwen* 打工春晚), a "shadow" festival that echoes the nationwide Spring Festival Gala televised on China Central Television that embodies official culture. Examining the social and cultural context and the themes of the program produced by the Migrant Worker Spring Festival Gala, Meng Dengying 孟登迎 (2017) points out that the "Gala" not only reflects the awakening of the new workers' cultural consciousness, but also their unique practice in creating new culture. However, the hardship of their working environment and creative conditions severely restricts further development of their cultural creativity (Meng 2017:53).

It is worth noting that in music and other performing arts created by and for migrant workers in China, migrant workers are often addressed with terms of endearment such as "peasant worker brothers" (*nongminggong xiongdi* 农民工兄弟), and "peasant worker friends" (*nongminggong pengyou* 农民工朋友). As the calling card of the Migrant Workers' Home, the New Workers' Art Troupe, which is committed to developing its own culture, explicitly proposed to do away with the term "peasant worker" and refer to themselves as "new workers", in juxtaposition with the (old) workers that were the employees of state-owned enterprises who enjoyed stable jobs and social security during the high-socialist era. The term "new worker" also differs from "migrant worker" in that "migrant worker" emphasizes what we might summarize as issues of displacement (if not as literally in Chinese as it does in English), but "new worker" emphasizes a sense of pride in one's labor (Zhang 2018:38). Overall, these terms reflect a sense of camaraderie, solidarity, and recognition among individuals who share similar backgrounds and experiences as migrant workers. Notably, in migrant worker literature itself, a clear alternative designation to counteract the existing discriminatory labels has not emerged, even as the prose that I have studied does use the narrative plot and the experiences of the migrant worker protagonists to denounce injustice and resist oppression.

1.3 Migrant worker literature

The cultural product that is my main object of inquiry is migrant worker literature. Literary works that reflect the migrant worker experience have emerged in the Pearl River Delta region of

southern China since the 1980s, when the first wave of migrant workers began to arrive in the newly designated special economic zones. Shenzhen cultural official Yang Honghai 杨宏海 was among the first commentators to take note of this literary phenomenon and he proposed the concept of *dagong* literature (*dagong wenxue* 打工文学), often rendered as “migrant worker literature” in English. Migrant worker literature is also referred to in English as “*dagong* literature” (Sun 2012b; Dooling 2017) or “battler literature” (Van Crevel 2017) in English-language scholarship, among other designations. In this study I will stick with the widely used “migrant worker literature”.

The definition of migrant worker literature has always been controversial. There are two influential views, which are illustrated by the writings of Liu Dongwu 柳冬妩 and Zhou Hang 周航, respectively. Liu (2013:48) holds that the subject matter and literary aesthetic standards are the criteria for defining migrant worker literature, regardless of the author’s personal background. By contrast, Zhou (2011:12) argues that migrant worker literature should only include works by writers with firsthand migrant worker experience. Liu emphasizes the content, subject matter, and artistry of the literary texts when defining working literature, while Zhou highlights the author’s background and migrant workers’ self-representation and articulation, so as to emphasize the political nature of migrant literature, and literature’s function of bearing witness to history and documenting social development in an authentic manner. I find Liu’s approach more useful since what I am interested in is how migrant workers are *represented* in literature rather than the authors’ life stories per se—quite aside from the question of whether these two things overlap in the works under scrutiny.

To serve my goal of exploring how migrant workers are represented in literature, I define migrant worker literature as *literary works whose subject matter centrally features typical aspects of the rural-urban migrant worker experience as determined by migration and labor*, whether or not the author has ever been a migrant worker themselves, and situated anywhere on the spectrum from fiction to non-fiction, including autobiography.

To position this study within the broader context of China studies and literary studies, let me start out by saying that contemporary migrant worker literature can be viewed as a continuation of workers’ literature within the rich tradition of modern Chinese literature (Iovene and Picerni 2022). The aspiration for a Chinese literature written by, for, and about workers can

be traced back to the 1920s when the May Fourth New Culture Movement⁸ (*Wusi Xinwenhua Yundong* 五四新文化运动) and Literary Revolution⁹ (*Wenxue Geming* 文学革命) were in full swing. Intellectuals such as Hu Shi 胡适, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, and Lu Xun 鲁迅 promoted the use of vernacular Chinese, emphasizing the need for literature to serve society, address social realities, and actively participate in social change (Denton 1996:48). In this cultural context, a large number of literary works depicting laborers and vulnerable groups emerged, with the works of the League of Left-Wing Writers (*Zuoyi zuojia lianmeng* 左翼作家联盟) perhaps being the most conspicuous. The “left-wing” literature was particularly influential during the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949) and the early years of the People's Republic of China (founded in 1949). It is a literature with a leftist or socialist political orientation, often focusing on social issues and highlighting the struggles of workers, peasants, and other marginalized groups.

The 1950s to 1970s witnessed a second peak in workers’ literature in China. In his 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” (*Zai Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua* 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话), Mao Zedong stressed the importance of literature serving the masses and politics. Consequently, the Party devoted considerable effort to training writers from less privileged backgrounds and constructing a propagandistic literature called “worker-peasant-soldier literature,” (*gongnongbing wenxue* 工农兵文学) which was expected to be about, for, and by the masses (Wang 2010:68). During this period, workers’ literature was still mainly written by intellectuals, but several “worker writers” and “peasant writers” rose to national prominence through officially promoted, state-supported venues, even if many were cultivated and assisted by highly educated mentors assigned to them by government bodies (Chen 2019).

⁸ The May Fourth New Culture Movement was a cultural and intellectual movement that emerged in China in the wake of the May Fourth Movement in 1919. It aimed to reform Chinese culture and society by promoting science, democracy, and vernacular language over traditional Confucian values and classical Chinese. The movement had a profound impact on Chinese literature, art, and intellectual thought, and it laid the foundation for the cultural and political changes that occurred in China in the 20th century (Chow 2013).

⁹ The Literary Revolution, also known as the New Literature Movement, was a literary and cultural movement that emerged in China in the 1920s. It aimed to challenge traditional Confucian values and promote modernity and individualism. It was characterized by a focus on vernacular language, experimentation with new literary forms, and a critique of feudalism and the status quo (Chow 2013).

Contemporary migrant worker literature is different from the state-promoted, propagandistic worker literature of the 1950s-1970s in important ways. Firstly, contemporary migrant worker literature is a grassroots literary activity, produced from the bottom up, mostly by and for migrant workers themselves, and often published unofficially (Van Crevel 2017). Secondly, the workers of the 1950s-1970s were permanent employees in state-owned enterprises; and in government discourse, the workers were a dignified political subject. In contrast, contemporary migrant workers exist on the fringes of society, and are faced with fundamental socioeconomic insecurity. Rather than reflecting the pride and self-confidence of workers and serving as propaganda such as in the 1950s-1970s, the themes of migrant worker literature mainly focus on heavy and arduous labor and on issues of displacement, and expose the dark side of China's rapid economic development.

In their historical overview of workers' literature in modern China, Paola Iovene and Federico Picerni elaborate the aforesaid vision of migrant worker literature as a new manifestation of the tradition of "left-wing" literature, and one that restores the connection between literature and reality by portraying the experiences of internal migrant workers in contemporary China with a greater degree of authenticity and social relevance than did state-sanctioned literature from the high-socialist era (Iovene and Picerni 2022). They note that in the 1920s, workers' literature was still dominated by intellectuals, and the documentation of working-class lives was mostly carried out by professional writers and journalists who had varying degrees of familiarity with such lives. In this respect, contemporary migrant worker literature presents a very different picture, initiated and dominated as it has been by migrant worker themselves since the 1980s, while professional writers or intellectual writers only later began to write literary works related to this theme.

Within a broader literary-historical framework, migrant worker literature also bears resemblance to 1980s Chinese "reportage literature" (*baogao wenxue* 报告文学) in terms of their shared focus on social issues and attempts to provide a realistic portrayal of life in China and its discontents. However, reportage literature in the 1980s often highlights the lives of urban elites and their struggles with modernity (Liu 2016), such as in Xu Chi's 徐迟 *Goldbach's Conjecture* (*Gedebahe Caixiang* 《哥德巴赫猜想》 1978). Conversely, migrant worker literature centers on the experiences of migrant workers who are frequently marginalized in mainstream society. Furthermore, the writing style differs between the two genres. Reportage literature is

more like news reports and typically adopts an objective and detached tone (Yun 2015), while migrant worker literature often employs a more emotional and subjective voice, reflecting the personal experiences and feelings of the writers (Jiang 2014).

From a cultural perspective, migrant worker literature aligns with the Chinese literary tradition of “worrying about the country and the people” (*youguo youmin* 忧国忧民). With a population of nearly 300 million, migrant workers are present in all aspects of Chinese life, and the issues they face are closely linked to those faced by all Chinese people in the contemporary era, particularly social stratification and the wealth gap. Thus, the study of migrant worker literature not only helps us better understand workers’ literature as part of the Chinese literary tradition, but also prompts us to reflect on contemporary societal issues.

2 Research questions, theory, and method

Representations in government discourse, in social science, in the news media, and in literature respectively combine to shape people’s knowledge and understanding about migrant workers. Within these heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory discourses, literary representation is special in that it is driven by the age-old conjunction of the aesthetics of cultural production with the ethics of social concern, and by the engagement of the artistic imagination with social realities. As such, it is different from representations produced by government institutions (political ideology, policy), commercial media (profit), and scholarship (the pursuit of knowledge). While government institutions often emphasize political ideology and policy, literature focuses on exploring and expressing the human experience, emotions, and imagination. While commercial media primarily aims to generate profit and attract audiences, often prioritizing sensationalism and entertainment value, literature can be driven by artistic expression and the desire to convey deeper truths, fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the human condition. While academic research seeks to advance knowledge, literature can integrate emotional and aesthetic dimensions, without being averse to intellectual pursuits. And needless to say, these various discursive categories can and do overlap.

In summary, representations of migrant workers in literature differ from those in government discourse, media discourse, and scholarly discourse. Two research questions flow

from these observations:

- What are key themes and techniques in literary representations of Chinese migrant workers in 21st-century Chinese prose?
- How do these literary representations relate to representations of migrant workers in government, news media, and social science discourse?

Exploring these questions is important because it will give us a better understanding of the relation of the lived experience of migrant workers as gauged from government, media, and scientific discourse on the one hand, and literary and cultural production, on the other. Moreover, it can illuminate especially effectively how global capitalism affects people at the lower end of the economic spectrum. Literature uses narrative techniques, symbolism, and other tools to evoke powerful emotions, challenge conventional wisdom, and invite readers to reflect on broader themes of morality, identity, and social issues. Studying migrant worker literature will help us grasp the human costs of globalization and the struggles of marginalized groups in the contemporary world.

In terms of theory, I will rely on Marxist theory in my overall understanding of the relationship between literature, society, and culture (in the broad sense). A key point here is that literature is closely linked to the society in which it is produced and that it is not produced in a vacuum. While this perspective informs my approach, it is important to acknowledge that many of the works discussed here are fictional and may not “faithfully” depict reality in the sense of offering strictly historical-factual documentation. I place a lot of emphasis on presenting the social and historical framework for the emergence of migrant workers and contextualizing the socio-historical setting of the primary texts with the findings of social science. Marxist literary theory emphasizes the importance of appreciating literary works’ aesthetic aspects and their capacity to liberate the human imagination. Therefore, I will focus on the aesthetic component of literature in my research and discuss literature’s ability to provoke critical thinking, stimulate empathy, and open up new possibilities for envisioning a more just and equitable society.

The following are the central theoretical concepts that will be applied in my research. Raymond Williams’s “structure of feeling” will be very helpful in the discussion about the social displacement of migrant workers and the emotional connection between migrant workers and their hometowns (Williams 1961). Henri Lefebvre’s theorization of space (Lefebvre 1991) and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1984) help me examine the interaction between

migrant workers and the urban space. I will draw on Laurent Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism"—an unachievable fantasy of the "good" life—to highlight migrant workers' struggle for subsistence in the city (Berlant 2011). Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) and Tanya Maria Golash-Boza's "disposable labor" (Golash-Boza 2015) are very helpful in the discussion of the toxic working environment and the vulnerability of migrant workers. Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor's concept of the "escape attempt" (Cohen and Taylor, 1976) refers to the ordinary and extraordinary ways in which people seek to defy the monotony and despair of everyday life, and I will use it to explore and interpret migrant workers' agency and their ways of resisting to the routine of everyday life.

Drawing on literary analysis, cultural studies, and sociological perspectives, this research will employ interdisciplinary methods and approaches. It will be mainly text-based. To explore the key themes and techniques in literary representations of Chinese migrant workers, I first select my primary texts based on the following criteria:

- (1) Official publication in print (unofficial print publications and online publications are rather different parts of the literary ecosystem and fall outside the scope of this study).
- (2) Demonstrable influence in terms of particular publication venues, repeated inclusion in anthologies, etc.
- (3) I will focus on the 21st century, with earlier texts in a background or ancillary fashion as necessary. This is to narrow the scope of my research and also because it is a critical and unique transitional stage, during which Chinese factories transitioned from rapid expansion to gradual standardization, and literary texts from this time period thus can provide us with a richly complex picture of the lives of migrant workers.
- (4) As for genre, I will focus on prose, mainly on fiction with a small number of non-fiction works. Notably, English-language scholarship has focused overwhelmingly on poetry, and migrant worker prose remains strikingly understudied.
- (5) Thematically, the texts under scrutiny all relate to the migration experience (the rural, the urban couple) and labor issues (factory life, resistance) in various ways.

I will combine close reading with socio-historical contextualization of the primary texts. In order to understand the specificities of Chinese migrant worker literature, I will investigate literary representation of migrant workers and set these off against their representations in other discourses, using a micro-perspective and close-reading of the literary source texts on the one

hand and a macro-perspective on government discourse, media discourse, and academic discourse, on the other. My core chapters are on the following four themes: the rural narrative, the urban couple, the factory, and resistance.

3 Scholarship on Chinese migrant worker literature

Migrant worker literature, closely linked to China's reform and opening-up policies and its urbanization and modernization goals, has become an important subject in the study of contemporary Chinese literature, attracting considerable attention from China-based and foreign-based scholars. In general, research on migrant worker literature focuses on topics such as the following: the identity and writing practices of migrant worker writers, the formation and development of this literary genre, its aesthetic value and its social significance, and its relationship with the Chinese literary tradition.

Most scholars implicitly or explicitly intimate that differences in the writers' personal background (especially first-hand experience of migrant labor, or the lack of such experience) will cause differences in the content and style of their writing. Some scholars hold that both professional writers and migrant worker writers have their own strengths and shortcomings, and their writings are complementary to each other. For instance, Jiang Lasheng 江腊生 (2008) points out that professional writers' writing of migrant workers is "imaginative" due to their lack of migrant worker experience, which sometimes causes them to over-symbolize and over-conceptualize the representation of migrant workers. By contrast, Jiang writes, migrant worker writers have personal life experience, but they tend to focus too much on material suffering and lack in-depth thinking (Jiang 2008: 203). Other scholars pay more attention to migrant workers' self-representation and tend to praise the political nature of their writing. For example, Sun (2012a), Jaguścik (2011), and Florence (2018) all think highly of migrant workers' self-representation because it offers an alternative discourse to the mainstream culture.

As previously mentioned, my research does not specifically focus on examining the influence of the author's identity on their writing. However, in the selection of texts for analysis, I attempt to strike a balance between writers who have work experience as migrant workers and those who do not possess such firsthand experience. This approach allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the themes, narratives, and artistic expressions present in the works, enriching the analysis and offering a broader understanding of the field.

On the issue of the formation of migrant worker literature, Han Dexin 韩德信 (2013), He Mang 贺芒 (2009), and Zhou Hang (2009) offer three answers from different perspectives. Han suggests that the social background of China's urbanization has spurred the formation of migrant worker literature (Han 2013:83). From the perspective of literary production, He Mang studies how migrant worker magazines helped the emergence of a migrant worker writers' community in Shenzhen (He 2009:32). Zhou Hang finds that the flourishing of migrant worker literature is directly related to its promotion by a prestigious magazine, *People's Literature* (*Renmin Wenxue*, 《人民文学》), which not only published works by migrant workers but also organized literary activities for the authors (Zhou 2009:82). Chen Chao 陈超 (2012) and Pan Guilin 潘桂林 (2014) examine the market's role in the formation of migrant worker literature. They state that the market is a double-edged sword, providing freedom of expression for migrant worker writers (compared to mainstream magazines sponsored by the Party-state) but also leading some writers to cater to the market and produce worthless and vulgar texts. This, they write, has helped cause a decline of migrant worker literature. Zhang Jun 张军 (2017) suggests that the impact of the internet, the social status change of migrant worker writers, the reduction of government support and the separation of migrant worker writers and professional critics have caused a gradual decline of migrant worker literature (Zhang 2017:9-11). Sun (2012b) and Dooling (2017) point out that in addition to the differentiation and transformation of migrant worker writers, China's censorship system is also one of the reasons for the uncertain future of migrant worker literature. Although my research does not focus extensively on the development of migrant worker literature as a genre, the articles written by the aforementioned scholars have provided me with a deeper understanding of the historical trajectory of migrant worker literature. This understanding has influenced my decision to select texts primarily from the 21st century. This period is marked by a flourishing and content-rich era in migrant worker literature that does justice to the intricate and multifaceted lives of migrant workers rather than rehearsing stereotypes.

On the topic of migrant worker literature's literary value, most scholars, such as Jiang Lasheng (2014), He Mang (2008), and Zhou Siming 周思明 (2008) are caught in a zero-sum framework of high social significance and (consequently) low aesthetic value. Among the scholars who discuss the social significance of migrant worker literature, Yang Honghai (2013:44) emphasizes its function of recording social change; Liu Chang 刘畅 (2017:135)

believes that migrant worker literature is a subaltern discourse, and that its hardship narrative is of great value to social policy makers— by listening to the complaints in migrant workers’ literature, she writes, government departments can have a better understanding of migrant workers’ social needs, and then adjust policies accordingly. Eleanor Goodman (2017), through her own experience in translating into English a migrant worker poetry collection edited by Qin Xiaoyu 秦晓宇 and called *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*, avers that the judgement that migrant worker poetry is of low aesthetic value may reflect prejudice or the limitations of the reader’s horizons (Goodman 2017:120). My research homes in on the texts themselves, examining their literary merits, thematic relevance, and broader social implications. By doing so, I seek to contribute to the broader scholarly discourse surrounding migrant worker literature, transcending a narrow focus on the text’s literary value.

Regarding the relationship between migrant worker literature and Chinese literary tradition, currently, there are four general points of orientation: the left-wing tradition (*Zuoyi wenxue* 左翼文学), the native-soil literature tradition (*xiangtu wenxue* 乡土文学), the May Fourth literature tradition, and classical Chinese literature. Zhou Shuitao 周水涛 (2011) and Ding Fan 丁帆 (2005) believe that the cultural position of migrant worker literature is similar to that of (ethno-culturally inclined) native-soil literature, i.e. hostile to the city and critical of consumer culture, but its narrative has shifted from the rural to the urban. Jiang Shuzhuo 蒋述卓 (2005) and Jiang Lasheng (2011) examine migrant worker literature from the perspective of the humanistic spirit in literature. They claim that migrant workers literature’s concerns for social issues actually inherit the humanistic spirit of the May Fourth literature tradition. He Xuan 何轩 (2010) claims that the migrant worker poetry has a direct connection with the *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing* 《诗经》), the ultra-canonical anthology from Chinese antiquity, in the sense that migrant worker poets are creating poetry according to the principle of “poetry verbalizing intent” (*shi yan zhi* 诗言志). As previously mentioned, I believe that migrant worker literature is part of the broader tradition of worker literature. However, the diverse perspectives of these scholars have also provided great inspiration for my research. In particular, my focus on rural narratives is inspired by the connection between migrant worker literature and native-soil literature.

In addition, there are four prominent scholars whose work deserves special attention: Yang Honghai, Liu Dongwu, Maghiel van Crevel, and Justyna Jaguścik. Yang’s 2009 book *An*

Overview of Migrant Worker Literature (Dagong Wenxue Zongheng Tan 《打工文学纵横谈》) is a collection of papers on migrant worker literature. Perhaps because Yang is a cultural official, the collection looks more like a blueprint for migrant worker literature's future development. It emphasizes migrant worker literature's function as a witness to the social changes and repeatedly mentions the government's contribution to the development of this literary and cultural product. Liu's (2012) monograph *Comprehensive Observations on Migrant Worker Literature* (Dagong Wenxue de Zhengti Guancha 《打工文学的整体观察》) focuses more on textual analysis than blueprint-making and provides a panoramic view of migrant worker literature, covering most of the important topics in this field. Maghiel van Crevel's contributions on migrant worker poetry include essays about the (cultural) translation of migrant worker poetry, which is essential for the visibility of migrant worker poetry in English. His translation of *dagong* as "battler" is the most pertinent, compared to the widely used "migrant worker", which is useful but strictly speaking not entirely accurate (given the fact that the derogatory appellation of "peasant-worker" still prevails in China), or "working for the boss", which is cumbersome. Justyna Jaguścik is one of the first foreign-based scholars who paid attention to the phenomenon of migrant worker literature, with much of her research revolving around gender, feminism and the body. One of her articles (2011) is based on the representation of women migrant workers in popular media culture. In her later works, through a close reading of the poetry written by migrant worker poet Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼, Jaguścik (2018) continued her interests in body discourse and migrant worker poetry. These four scholars' contributions have been instrumental in shaping the field. Their work has not only provided me with a solid foundation of knowledge on migrant worker literature but have also sparked my research interest in the field. They provide valuable insights for anyone interested in exploring the intricacies of migrant worker literature.

There are also scholars—such as Sun Wanning, Gong Haomin, and Zhou Xiaojing, all primarily publishing in English—who approach migrant worker literature from an interdisciplinary perspective, including sociological and environmental perspectives. Sun Wanning (2010 and 2012b) regards migrant worker poetry as a significant way of cultural representation and political articulation. Sun is also intrigued by the formation of the working-class consciousness and the paradoxical process of class formation and class dissipation of migrant workers in contemporary China. Gong (2012, 2018) focuses on migrant worker poet Zheng Xiaoqiong from the angle of environmental criticism. Zhou's (2015, 2016, 2017, 2020)

research shares many similarities with Gong's: she is also interested in environmental issues and privileges Zheng Xiaoqiong's poems. However, they approach the texts from different points of view. Gong is concerned about the impact of industrial pollution on the land, while Zhou cares more about the impact of industry and pollution on the human body. Furthermore, Zhou consistently considers issues from a global and international perspective.

In conclusion, Sun, Gong, and Zhou's works all help to raise migrant worker poetry's visibility in English. That said, we need to emphasize that to varying degrees, Sun, Gong, and Zhou all more or less use migrant worker poetry as documentary material to support their research into social issues, although Zhou and Gong do also engage in literary criticism. As I position my study at the intersection of China studies and literary studies. I will mobilize various angles to enhance my analysis, including the aforesaid juxtaposition of literary representations with other discursive categories (government, media, social science), cultural studies, and sociological perspectives, all of which will ultimately serve the purpose of literary analysis.

4 Contributions of this study

Government and media representations have overwhelmingly been the focus of research in English-language research publications on China's internal migrant workers for decades. By contrast, their representation in cultural production, including literature, began to attract critical attention only recently. Perhaps because of the mediagenicity of a subaltern type of poethood (Van Crevel 2021:168), the overwhelming majority of research in English-language scholarship to date is on poetry. Fictional and non-fictional prose remain sorely understudied, even though they can enhance our understanding of migrant worker literature and culture at large.

Compared with English-language scholarship, studies of migrant worker literature in Chinese are voluminous—and they are mostly on fiction. Most scholars regard migrant worker literature more as socio-cultural documentation than as literature that deserves textual analysis and interpretation in its own right. As such, detailed textual analysis of migrant worker literature is lacking.

Given the current status of the migrant worker literature study, I hope my research will contribute to the field in the following ways:

- *Prose*—meaning literary fiction and non-fiction—will be the focus of my research.

This will complement English-language scholarship to date, which mostly focuses on

migrant worker poetry. There are a few exceptions, such as Harlan Chambers (on Liang Hong's *Liangzhuang* series), Amy Dooling (on a novel by Wang Lili), Cheng Li (on Zhou Shuheng's and Wang Ershi's novels), Federico Picerni (on Xu Zechen's short stories, and Fan Yusu's autobiographical prose "My Name is Fan Yusu"), Xiao Faye Hui (on Fan Yusu), but overall prose has remained understudied to date. With its space for narrative detail, prose provides an ample space for extensive, precise scenes and descriptions, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of migrant worker experiences. Prose often encompasses diverse voices and intricate plotlines, providing a platform for exploring the broader social and cultural contexts surrounding migrant worker literature. These aspects enhance the depth and breadth of my research, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of migrant worker experiences within the realm of literature.

- Relatively speaking, Chinese-language scholarship on migrant worker literature has remained underrepresented to date in English-language scholarship. My work will help redress the balance and bridge the gap between different academic communities. Chinese-language scholarship encompasses a vast amount of resources and a wide range of topics, providing me with a wealth of inspiration and insights during the conceptualization and writing of this study.
- My research will address migrant workers' *rural* experience among other topics. Different from overwhelmingly negative media representations, by focusing on literary representations of migrant workers and more specifically on what I will call the rural narrative, my study offers an alternative to widespread and sometimes clichéd visions of rural-to-urban migrant workers in present-day China. I find that rural people often take a favorable view of *dagong* and migrant workers. In this view, migrant workers can be achievers; they seize opportunities for social mobility, and different from their homogenizing and occasionally dehumanizing portrayal in the media, they are individual human beings, and they are family members who are needed and missed when they are away.
- I will foreground textual analysis, highlighting the importance of literariness in the representation of migrant workers. Unlike academic or media texts, literary representation can use various literary devices to create especially vivid and

memorable stories, which can convey information very effectively and impress readers. Additionally, through the use of literary devices, the text can imply that the experiences of one character are not unique, but rather universal experiences shared by many individuals in similar circumstances. This universalization of experience can help readers empathize with and better understand the experiences of migrant workers.

5 Chapter outlines

The dissertation is organized into five main chapters. The present introduction provides an overview of the historical context of migrant worker literature, establishing the groundwork for the subsequent discussions and analyses. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 consist of case studies, each centering around a significant theme.

Chapter 2 focuses on the representation of the rural. The focus of literary works about Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers is often on their urban experience, in which they are mostly portrayed as a socially disadvantaged group and a deviant presence in urban life. The reader less frequently encounters a complementary rural narrative on migrant workers' experience of their native countryside. This is remarkable, since the countryside holds demonstrable importance for migrant workers, and studying the associated rural narrative is essential for understanding their social relations and identity construction. By examining three texts, Liang Hong's 梁鸿 non-fictional *China in One Village* (*Zhongguo zai Liangzhuang* 《中国在梁庄》2010), Sun Huifen's 孙惠芬 novel *Jikuan's Carriage* (*Jikuan de Mache* 《吉宽的马车》2007), and Luo Weizhang's 罗伟章 novella "Our Road" (*Women de lu* 《我们的路》2005), chapter 2 shows the complex connection between migrant workers and the countryside. As Liang's text shows, rural people in Liangzhuang mostly have positive evaluations of *dagong* and migrant workers: migrant workers can be achievers; they seize opportunities for social mobility. Sun's writing demonstrates that migrant laborers have the actual ability to modify urban space, rather than being powerless subalterns stuck in urban environments that are supposedly fundamentally not theirs to belong to and faced with an unforgiving labor market that is supposedly not theirs to manipulate. Luo's going-home narrative, a dialogue between migrant workers and those who have remained in the countryside, speaks back to Liang's and Sun's texts, as it shows that respect and recognition in the countryside come with heavy and

sometimes debilitating responsibilities on the part of the migrant workers as they go (back) out to *dagong*. Taken together, these texts highlight features of migrant workers that have effectively been invisible to date, adding a key element to our understanding of this much-discussed demographic and its literary representations and of subaltern cultural production at large.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus from the rural to the urban space, concentrating on the literary representation of city-based migrant worker couples. I will start off with Liang Xiaosheng's 梁晓声 short story "The Abandoned Home" (*Huangqi de jiyuan* 《荒弃的家园》 1995) as a prelude in order to explain the existence of migrant workers' male-female couples in the city. Then, by examining three literary texts, Wei Wei's 魏微 short story "Mr. Zheng's Woman" (*Dalao Zheng de nüren* 《大老郑的女人》 2003), and Jing Yongming's 荆永鸣 novellas "Breathing Loudly" (*Dasheng huxi* 《大声呼吸》 2005) and "Leaving Beijing" (*Chujing ji* 《出京记》 2016), I will consider typical features of migrant worker couples in the city, and how these features are related to the larger picture of migrant workers' urban subsistence in literature. I find that salient features of city-based migrant workers' couples as represented in migrant worker literature include representations of the temporary couple, of cramped and crowded living space, and of rural-urban marriages. These features show that migrant workers' urban couples are far from ideal and indeed "flawed": the temporary couple challenges traditional family ethics, the couple in the cramped and crowded living space feel insecure and vulnerable in the urban space, and rural-urban marriages appear fragile due to unequal social status, as native urbanites enjoy higher status than rural-urban migrants. For most of the protagonists, economic adversity is the biggest obstacle to their survival in the urban space. Whereas most scholars point out that China's notorious *hukou* system is an important cause of the plight of migrant workers in cities (Pun 2016, Sun 2014a), the literary representations of migrant workers' struggles show the need for a more nuanced analysis. It suggests that economic constraints, rather than institutional residence limits, are now the most significant impediment to migrant workers' urban integration.

Chapter 4 examines the literary representation of migrant workers by focusing on the experience of factory workers. Based on Xiao Xiangfeng's 萧相风 non-fiction work *Dictionary: Southern Industrial Life* (*Cidian: Nanfang Gongye Shenghuo* 《词典:南方工业生

活》2010), Fang Yiluo's 房忆萝 autobiographical novel *I Am a Floating Flower* (*Wo Shi Yiduo Piaoling de Hua* 《我是一朵飘零的花》2008), and Wang Shiyue's 王十月 novella "The Nine Linked Rings" (*Jiu lianhuan* 《九连环》2009), chapter 4 turns to exhaustion, vulnerability, and precarity as salient features of factory life, particularly from the perspective of the construction of factory space. With the I-narrators, both Xiao's and Fang's texts offer rich descriptions of the exhaustion and the hierarchical power relations in the factory space through individual experiences. In these texts, I find that the factory space embodies and reinforces the hierarchical power structure. Driven by the goal of efficiency and profit, the cramped working space in the factory and the cramped and crowded living space of the dormitory exert a high degree of control over migrant workers, which manifests in the restriction of movement and deprivation of privacy. Different from some social science studies which argue that the agglomeration of workers in collective dormitories in workplace environments provides a breeding ground for group resistance (Pun and Smith 2007; Zhou 2020:54), Xiao's and Fang's texts highlight the resulting competition and conflicts instead, which impede the development of group consciousness and lead to a lack of solidarity among workers. In his third-person narrative, Wang provides us with a bigger picture. Unlike other discourses that often emphasize the antagonism between workers, factory management and government, Wang draws attention to the deeper systemic precarity of factory workers by concentrating on the complex interrelatedness of the three parties.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 primarily address the disadvantaged situation of migrant workers: economic plight, social injustice, exploitation, precarity, and so on. In chapter 5, I turn to the representation of migrant workers' agency in resisting social injustice, with a focus on a motif of resistance and revenge. In the mainstream discourse, especially in the propaganda-driven media representations designed to ameliorate social conflict and to maintain social stability, migrant workers are often depicted as subalterns without agency, or as the underclass that needs to be educated and "saved". By contrast, literary representation offers more space for migrant workers' individual agency for resisting social injustice, through resorting to violence, the law, or resistance as part of everyday life. The selected texts: You Fengwei's 尤凤伟 short story "Revenge for My Sister Liu Zhi" (*Ti meimei liuzhi baochou* 《替妹妹柳枝报仇》2005), Wang Shiyue's 王十月 short story "The Stamping Press Operator" (*Kai chongchuang de ren* 《

开冲床的人》2009), and “The National Order Form” (*Guojia dingdan* 《国家订单》2008), Fang Yiluo’s 房忆萝 novel *I Am a Floating Flower* (*Wo Shi Yiduo Piaoling de Hua* 《我是一朵飘零的花》2008), Wang Anyi’s 王安忆 short story “The Migrant worker Liu Jianhua” (*Mingong Liu Jianhua* 《民工刘建华》2001), and Liang Hong’s 梁鸿 non-fiction *Working away from Liangzhuang* (*Chu Liangzhuang Ji* 《出梁庄记》2013), show that in migrant worker literature, migrant workers’ resistance and revenge are generally unsuccessful. The cost of personal violence as shown in the first section is often greater than enduring injustice. Seeking legal recourse may be met with further harm due to collusion between government and the corporate world as shown in the second section, and, more discouragingly, justice in the world of capital is limited. The seemingly successful everyday resistance in the third section raises concerns about ethics and professional norms because the victims of this resistance are ordinary people, rather than those who truly cause the plight of migrant workers. They are at best an emotional outlet for suffering social injustice, and not an effective means of social resistance any more than in the real world.

Finally, a brief epilogue will reflect on the findings of this thesis and consider possible topics of future research.