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

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## Chapter 4

### Exhaustion, vulnerability, precarity: factory life

The present chapter extends the analysis to the theme of factory work in migrant worker literature, with a focus on factory workers in the southern industrial zones. By factory workers, I mean primarily migrant workers from less-developed rural areas, typically inland China, who work in factories in more developed cities in eastern China. Factory workers account for almost 30% of all migrant workers and are the largest segment of the overall migrant worker population, followed by construction workers (about 20%), and workers in the wholesale and retail industries (about 12%) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). Many factory workers live and work in deplorable conditions and are denied fundamental civil rights. As regards job stability, income, employee rights, social status, and so on, state-owned company workers in the high-socialist era were much better off than today's factory workers.

I concentrate on factory workers in southern industrial zones. First of all, factory workers in China's southern industrial zones came from the first large waves of labor migration, arriving in the special economic development zones as early as the 1980s. Equally important, the southern industrial zones are the birthplace of migrant worker literature. Many well-known migrant worker writers such as Zheng Xiaoqiong, Xu Lizhi 许立志, and Wang Shiyue write about factory work in the southern industrial cities; and the earliest literary critics of migrant worker literature, Liu Dongwu and Yang Honghai, also heavily lean toward factory work in southern cities as a core theme.

The factory work experience is shaped by the spatial specificity of the factory environment and by the labor regime. In her 2005 book, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in A Global Workplace*, sociologist Pun Ngai devotes an entire chapter to discussing the role of the factory environment as well as the disciplinary techniques in turning young rural migrant workers into industrialized and productive laborers. Zhou Xiaojing, in her 2020 book *Migrant Ecologies: Zheng Xiaoqiong's Women Migrant Workers*, discusses the newly produced spaces for migrant workers, such as the "factory cities" (gigantic factories), the "villages-in-the-city" (slum-like urban villages where migrant workers live), and the "hollow villages" (whose predominant populations are the aging parents and left-behind children of migrant workers), highlighting the connection between local and global networks of capital and labor. Inspired by

the works of Pun and Zhou, this paper will explore the literary representation of factory work from the perspective of spatiality and the labor regime. It focuses on the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a crucial transitional period where Chinese factories moved from rapid growth to gradual normalization, and the protection of migrant workers' rights and interests was progressively strengthened (Qian and Zhu 2018: 2). Literary texts from this period can thus provide us with a richly complex picture of the lives of migrant workers.

This chapter poses the following questions: What are key themes and techniques in the literary representation of migrant workers' experience of factory work? How do these add to our understanding of the logic of labor and life in the factory environment in contemporary China? To address these questions, I will review three texts: Xiao Xiangfeng's 萧相风 non-fiction work *Dictionary: Southern Industrial Life* (《词典:南方工业生活》2010), Fang Yiluo's 房忆萝 autobiographical novel *I Am a Floating Flower* (《我是一朵飘零的花》2008), and Wang Shiyue's 王十月 novella "The Nine Linked Rings" (《九连环》2009). All three texts highlight migrant workers' exhaustion, vulnerability, and precarity in the first decade of the 2000s.

Fang Yiluo was born in 1981 in Sichuan Province. She started writing the autobiographical novel *I Am a Floating Flower* on the online Tianya Forum (*Tianya luntan* 天涯论坛) in 2006 to record her experiences as a migrant worker. Owing to its popularity among migrant workers, her online text was later taken up by a print publisher in 2008 (Sun 2014b: 169). Since then, the author appears to have stopped writing. Not incidentally, this reflects the situation of the majority of migrant worker authors, who have published but not seen a change in their working life as a result. Fang's novel is worth analyzing because it provides us with a detailed description of industrial life and a vivid portrayal of the complicated power dynamics between management and workers that are integral to factory life.

Xiao Xiangfeng (pen name), also known as Li Gang 李刚 (birth name), was born in 1977 in Hunan Province. After graduating from college in 2000, he came to Dongguan, Guangdong Province, as a migrant worker. His college education made it easier for him to get work, as the majority of migrant workers in the 2000s had only a junior high school certificate or less. After 2001, he relocated to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone to work in a variety of factories, including wire manufacturing, electronics, electroplating, metal-plastic, and battery production. In his spare time, Xiao began to write, and his factory experience became the material for his

literary creation. In 2010, his non-fiction work *Dictionary: Southern Industrial Life* won the first prize in the third Shenzhen Original Internet Literature Competition. Although the work brought fame to Xiao, he did not become a professional writer. He is now doing publicity work for a company in Shenzhen. Xiao's *Dictionary* is worth analyzing because of its innovative literary form, as a pseudo-reference work that explains 28 entries that typify migrant worker life, such as "assembly line," "work clothes," "overtime," "clocking in," "work injury insurance," etc.

Born in Hubei Province in 1972, Wang Shiyue is among the best-known migrant worker writers. Since the early 1990s, he has had various jobs including assembly line worker, editor, and art director of an advertising company in Wuhan, Foshan, Dongguan, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and other places, mostly in the Pearl River Metropolitan Region. Since his debut in 2000, he has published many short stories, novellas, and novels. Because of his outstanding creative achievements, he was hired by the *Mirs Bay* (*Dapeng Wan* 大鹏湾) magazine of Shenzhen Bao'an District Culture and Art Center in 2000, where he served as editor, reporter, and editorial director. He became a professional writer in 2004 and joined the China Writers Association in 2007. He is now the vice-editor-in-chief of *Artworks* (*Zuopin* 作品), a prestigious magazine of the Guangdong Writers Association. Wang is a success story of migrant worker literature. He found steady employment in the cultural sector and has written his way out of migrant worker life. His novella "The Nine Linked Rings", the third text discussed in this article, is about fundamental insecurities in migrant workers' lives. It is worth analyzing because Wang places a southern industrial town in the larger context of industrialization and globalization and describes the complicated and dynamic inter-dependence of the various parties involved in migrant labor.

I will discuss Xiao's and Fang's works together since both concentrate on the poor working and living situations of migrant workers in the early 2000s. Wang's story takes place in the later years of the decade, focusing on the lives of Chinese migrant workers in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. In Xiao's and Fang's texts, workers and factory management are portrayed as antagonistic; by contrast, Wang's text shows their interdependence. Hence, these three texts, taken together, demonstrate the diversity and richness of the representation of factory work in migrant worker literature. The texts under scrutiny depict three salient features of factory life: exhaustion, vulnerability, and precarity. They present these features as closely interrelated, as is reflected in the analysis that follows.

## 1. Exhaustion: discipline and personal choice

What stands out immediately in the portrayal of factory life in many literary texts is the constant sense of exhaustion, an overwhelming feeling of fatigue that permeates both the bodies and minds of the characters. At first glance, exhaustion seems to be the result of long hours of labor and sleep deprivation. However, the organization of the factory environment also plays an important role. As shown in Xiao's and Fang's texts, the factory space, all the way from individual work stations on the assembly line to the vast factory premises as a whole, has a pervasive influence on the bodies and minds of the workers.

### *1.1 The art of control: from the assembly line to the time management system*

Synonymous with efficiency and mass production, the assembly line and modern factory settings at large are considered indispensable technological cornerstones of China's economic rise, and they have won widespread acclaim in the government's discourse on modernization and urbanization (Fu 2021). However, migrant worker literature reveals the control and exploitation of factory workers by the factory environment and calls attention to the dark side of factory life that is veiled by a focus on national GDP, economic growth, and the national goal of modernization through industrialization and urbanization.

In his *Dictionary*, Xiao devotes a separate entry to the assembly line and calls it “one of the greatest inventions in industrial history” (174):

流水拉再简单不过了，就是一条铁架子，上面循环滚动着橡胶皮带。拉上装一些灯管和辅助作业的工装，两边排上凳子，坐上女工，就是一条流水拉。[...] 根据每道工序的作业快慢和生产进度，可以灵活地旋转一个速度旋钮，随时调节流水拉的快慢。

An assembly line is very simple—an iron shelf with rubber belts rolling on it. There are some lamps and tools for auxiliary work, with stools on both sides and female workers on the stools. That's it. [...] The speed knob can be rotated as needed to adjust the belt's speed at any given time based on the operational speed and progress of each process (174–75).

Although the simple structure and composition of the assembly line in Xiao's description seem to be far from “the greatest invention,” it clearly demonstrates how machines control workers through spatial relations. The assembly line occupies a central position, and the female workers

are in service positions, no different from the lamps and stools. The speed of the assembly line can be adjusted at any time, which is not to cater to the workers' most comfortable working speed but to match the production schedule and maximize the extraction of productivity and hence the exploitation of the workers. Thus, factory workers are not only auxiliary instruments to the assembly line but also under its control, with their hands at the mercy of the line's speed. This reminds us of Pun Ngai's observation, in her fieldwork in an electronics company in Shenzhen, that "placing a body on the line was the first technique of the disciplinary machine to work on the worker" (Pun 2005: 81). By "dissecting" an assembly line and stressing its simplicity, Xiao debunks the mystery and advanced nature of modern technology that it represents, highlighting the connection between the simplicity of the assembly line and its powerful control over the workers. As such, Xiao's deceptively simple, neutral description of the assembly line is subversive in nature, as he encourages the reader to realize and contemplate how disturbing the aforesaid connection actually is.

Compared with Xiao's focus on the structure of an assembly line in his *Dictionary*, Fang's description of the assembly line in *Flower* is directly on its control of workers:

生产部的女孩子大多数是紧挨着坐在一条拉上，就连上厕所也要申请离岗证。离岗证每条拉只有两个，也就是说一条拉最多不得两个人同时离岗，且明确规定上班时间内上厕所不得超过五分钟。

Most of the girls in the production department are sitting right next to each other beside the assembly line. They must apply for a leave-of-work permit when they need to go to the toilet. There are only two permits for each line, which means that a maximum of two people can leave their position at the same time in one line. Moreover, it is clearly stipulated that during working hours one must not stay in the toilet for more than five minutes. (49)

Fang deftly highlights a human's physiological desire in order to demonstrate the assembly line's control over workers' time. To use the toilet, workers must obtain a permit, and there are time constraints. Through the harsh limitations of their off-job time, Fang highlights the dehumanizing working environment of the factory floor, where workers' significance as individuals does not count for anything. The workers are thus fixed in place at the assembly line, becoming extensions of the machine they are operating—or rather, of the machine that is

operating *them*. It is well known that through the division of labor in the assembly line, workers are trained as specialists in just one limited movement or skill, so as to improve efficiency and yield (Nye 2013:26, Cobley 2009: 41), with deleterious effects on their well-being. Both Xiao's and Fang's texts show that the power of the assembly line lies in its control over the workers: it subordinates human beings to the demands of the production process.

Through the division of labor, the assembly line raises productivity by forcing several people to collaborate in a production process (as distinct from a situation where a single worker makes a product from start to finish). Thus, the efficiency of the assembly line requires that there are enough workers to work at the same time. To ensure that this is the case, there are various regulations on the management of workers' time in the factory environment. Xiao offers us two examples in his *Dictionary*: "shift" and "rotation":

倒班是工业生产里的一首回文诗，是马达里循环旋转的皮带。工人在焚膏继晷的制造车间被分成两班或者多班，交替连接了日日夜夜的生产。

Shift is a palindrome in industrial production; it is a rubber belt that revolves inside a motor. Workers are divided into two or more shifts in the non-stop manufacturing workshop, alternately connecting day and night production. (101)

轮休是工业生产中的一个逗号，不，是一个顿号。在工厂里，轮休是在不中断生产的情况下安排工人们轮流休息。[...] 今天你休，明天我休，后天他休，这样就可以调换其他岗位的人顶岗，不至于造成生产岗位的大面积缺人。[...] 在高速高效的产业链里，人们都是接力赛下飞奔的运动员。只有接力棒一直在跑。

Rotation is a comma in industrial production; no, it is an enumerative comma. In the factory, rotation is to arrange workers to take turns to rest without interrupting production. [...] You will be off today, I will be off tomorrow, and he will be off the day after tomorrow. This enables the assignment of other individuals to cover shifts and prevents a significant staff shortage in production positions. [...] In the high-speed and high-efficiency industrial chain, people are all athletes galloping in the relay race. Only the baton keeps running all the time. (179)

Palindrome is a rhetorical technique in which a text reads the same backward as forward. It emphasizes the features of repetition in poetry and creates a powerful artistic effect of looping.

At first glance, it looks like a long way from the dull factory life, but Xiao, a migrant worker writer who is familiar with both factory work and literary writing, shows what a palindrome poem has in common with the shift: back and forth, the cycle goes on and on. Similarly, rotation is linked to a comma because both denote pauses. The author proceeds to revise the metaphor to an enumerative comma (a frequently used punctuation mark in Chinese), because the latter more strongly evokes the repetition and monotony associated with the conveyor belt than a regular comma. And the shorter pause of an enumerative comma emphasizes the ephemerality of a rotation. By comparing shifts to a palindrome, and rotations to an enumerative comma, Xiao ironically aestheticizes the dull factory work, creating an effect of defamiliarization that makes his message more stimulating to the reader and thus more memorable and effective. In the end, Xiao draws an analogy between industrial production and a relay race, where it is not the “athlete but “the baton [that] keeps running,” highlighting the fact that in the factory environment, production, the ultimate goal, takes precedence over the workers, who are reduced to mere tools.

Whether it is “shift” or “rotation”, the purpose is to keep the assembly line rolling forward and the manufacturing process running smoothly. Under such circumstances, workers’ time is manipulated and rearranged by the labor regime at will, resulting in an arrhythmic and disorderly schedule.

In *Flower*, Fang shows the harmful impact of such a schedule on workers:

直到 10 点钟我们才下班。一直工作了 14 个小时，回到宿舍，浑身都像散了架似的，走路都走不成直线了。[...] 回到宿舍我们还是倒头就睡。再次醒来时，已经是晚饭时间了，于是匆匆吃了晚饭回来继续睡，真是恨不得连吃饭的时间也可以睡觉。因为 7: 25 我们还要准时集合，又一个漫长而痛苦的黑夜即将开始了。

We didn’t get off work until ten o’clock in the morning. After working [on the night shift] for 14 hours, when I returned to the dormitory, my body seemed to fall apart, and I couldn’t walk in a straight line. [...] We fell asleep as soon as we returned to the dormitory. It was already dinner time when I woke up, so I hurriedly ate my dinner and went back to sleep. If only I could have continued sleeping even as we were eating... Because we had to gather precisely at 7:25 pm when another long and painful night was about to begin. (43-44)



In comparison to Xiao, Fang's language style is much plainer, as she does not employ intricate and novel rhetorical strategies, but that doesn't mean her language isn't effective in a literary way. Fang uses a first-person narrative to tell the reader about her working day in a plaintive tone, as if she were a friend, reducing the emotional distance between the reader and the narrator. Her detailed descriptions of the workers' physical exhaustion and their sleep deprivation immerse readers in the scene and give credibility to the narrative. Fang ends her narrative with the workers' mental repulsion at the prospect of the following shift, further eliciting pity from the reader by emphasizing that the workers' future is an endless loop of grueling labor and fatigue.

The monotony and repetition of worker life are also reflected in spatial terms. As Fang describes in *Flower*: "Our life is a fixed-line of three points: dormitory – factory floor – canteen, and we travel this line of three points every day" (110). Fang uses these three landmarks to describe the monotony and repetition in workers' lives and highlights the fact that time management and space arrangement are inseparable in the factory environment.

### *1.2 Mental discipline*

Besides controlling the workers' bodies and making them work long hours as efficiently as possible, another type of control highlighted in literary texts is one that can be summed up as the imposition of mental discipline. In both Xiao's and Fang's texts, "taming" workers to make them obey factory management is a recurring topic. One of the common techniques is the advancement of "corporate culture", as in Xiao's *Dictionary*:

什么是企业文化呢？也就是企业的伦理纲常。老板说，所有员工一律不许外宿，这就是企业文化。总经理说，员工平时下班外出，均需要向经理写申请。这就是企业文化...除了无条件执行和各类处罚，还有一个关键词是“感恩”。这是大多数公司反复强调的企业文化。[...] 其最终目的不是文化，而是利润——虚假、忽悠，把文化当做点缀的花瓶。（197）

What is corporate culture? It is the ethical principle of the enterprise. If the boss declares that no employee is allowed to reside off-site, this is an example of corporate culture. Similarly, if the general manager requires all employees to submit a written request to leave the factory premises after work, this is also a reflection of corporate culture. [...] In addition to unconditional obedience and various penalties, another keyword of corporate culture is "gratitude,"

emphasized time and again by most companies. [...] The ultimate goal is not culture, but profit—falsehood, deception, and treating culture as a decorated flower vase. (197)

Xiao first defines “corporate culture” in the factory environment as a collection of unreasonable commands and penalties in the name of loyalty to the company’s mission. He follows the explanation with two particular instances to make it more apparent, which also fits with the dictionary structure. In the above two examples, the owners and managers of the enterprise issue orders to the workers in an authoritative manner. This shows unequivocally that “corporate culture” in the factory environment is not created by the workers themselves, who make up the overwhelming majority of people in the factory, but is formulated by those higher up in the hierarchy in order to brainwash the lower-ranked workers. In the end, Xiao directly points out that what is at the core of corporate culture is a distorted representation of factory work that deceives workers and demands their gratitude to the factory, eliding the exploitation of workers and maintaining a charade of “rationality”, not to mention corporate profits.

In addition to cultural brainwashing, Fang’s text shows another kind of mental discipline in the factory environment: “military management” (40), which involves doing exercises, singing factory songs, and reciting factory slogans before starting work every day. Army-like daily rituals are thus performed in the factory environment, to advance the discipline and the display of loyalty. Once the worker accepts the idea that he or she is a soldier, they will obey strict and indeed unreasonable regulations and requirements imposed on them by the factory, and internalize these as a type of self-management. Like “corporate culture”, the purpose of “military management” in Fang’s *Flower* is to train workers’ obedience.

As such, under the dual control of body and mind, the protagonist in Fang’s *Flower* complains that she is so exhausted that she has become a lifeless extension of the machines in the workshop:

我逐渐习惯了这种繁忙而劳累的生活。我觉得自己越来越疲倦，越来越麻木了。[...] 我觉得自己已经不是人了，而是和车间那些平车、烫位一样，只是个没有思想、只知道干活的机器！

I gradually got used to this busy and tiring life. I felt more and more exhausted and numb. [...] I felt that I was no longer a human being, but just like the flatlock machine and irons in the

workshop—a mere machine devoid of thoughts, only capable of functioning mechanically (110).

Through the all-round control of workers' time, body, and mind, the entangled physical, regulatory, and cultural dimensions of the factory environment discipline the workers into cheap machines that blend in with the factory's other production equipment. Notably, the protagonist's complaint is based on her reflection on her own life. So, the essence of her complaint is not her sadness at losing her ability to think, but the unfortunate truth that she is unable to do anything about the alarming realization that she is machine-like cheap labor whose life is nothing but endless exhaustion.

### *1.3 Rest or exhaustion: an illusion of choice*

So far, I have discussed various disciplinary techniques that lead to workers' exhaustion in the factory environment. Whether it is time management or mental discipline, they are all external pressures and constraints imposed by factories on workers in the interest of output and profit. However, exhaustion is also sometimes portrayed as the result of the workers' own choices. One character in Fang's text says: "what we earn is overtime pay [...] I can't wait to work over 16 hours a day" (70).

Xiao's entry on "overtime" in his *Dictionary* explains the willingness and, indeed, the eagerness of workers to work overtime:

这家工厂按照劳动法来计算加班工资，平时加班 1:1.5，周六周日休息日加班 1:2，节假日是 1:3。由于底薪一般，加班费高，大家主要是靠加班费生活。[...]多加班就成了员工向往的福利了。(153)

This factory calculates overtime wages according to the labor law. The usual over-time pay is 1.5:1 to normal pay, on Saturdays and Sundays it is 2:1, and on holidays it is 3:1. Because of the low base salary and high overtime pay, individuals mainly rely on overtime pay as their main source of income. [...] Thus, working overtime becomes a benefit that employees yearn for. (153)

Because overtime pay is much higher than normal pay, many workers give up their rest time and choose to work overtime. Although they know that overtime will cause exhaustion and wear out

their bodies, they still choose to do so. Thus, workers appear to aggravate their own exhaustion. At first glance, one can even say that the exhaustion of workers is the result of a short-sighted choice, made by the workers themselves, to abuse their own bodies for money.

However, Xiao's and Fang's texts suggest that this is not about choice, because working overtime may be voluntary in name but is in consequence of financial pressure. In his *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism*, a seminal study on the labor process in capitalist factories, Marxist sociologist Burawoy uses the game metaphor to explain workers' situation: "participating in the choices capitalism forces us to make also generates consent to its rules, its norms" (Burawoy 1979:93). He then concludes that capitalism controls workers by giving them the illusion of choice in a highly restrictive environment: "by constituting our lives as a series of games, a set of limited choices, that capitalist relations not only become objects of content but are taken as given and immutable" (Burawoy 1979:93). As such, the exhaustion of migrant workers is not at all a consequences of freely made individual choices. By setting extremely low hourly pay rates and relatively high overtime pay rates, the factory's wage system as depicted in these stories helps to keep the cost of production down, at the same time as stimulating workers to work overtime "voluntarily" so as to keep production up.

Thus, the game rules set by modern capitalism have succeeded in co-opting workers into embracing the practice of capitalism. On the workers' side, the only resource available to them in this capitalist environment of a factory is their own body. Just as the factory makes full use of its equipment, in order to make money, so the workers in Xiao's and Fang's texts are compelled to make full use of their bodies and "choose" to work overtime. In a nutshell, factors like the factory's wage system, the constraints on the workers, and their need to make money form a highly restrictive environment that deceptively presents the exploitation of the workers as the result of voluntary, independent choices made by the workers.

## **2. Vulnerability: institutionalized traps, work-related injuries, and lack of solidarity**

A second feature of migrant workers' factory life that is highlighted in powerful ways in both Xiao's and Fang's texts is vulnerability, more precisely the structural experience of being attacked and harmed in the hostile environment of the industrial city. Both Xiao's and Fang's

texts show that the factory workers are vulnerable both outside and inside the factory environment.

### *2.1 Outside the factory grounds: institutionalized traps and crimes*

In Xiao's and Fang's texts, most factory workers in the southern coastal industrial cities are from remote inland provinces. In order to manage these migrant workers who have left their hometowns, the city governments require them to carry various documents that can be used to check their identity, such as the "temporary residence permit", "floating population permit", "local guarantee", etc. (Zou 2021; Zou and Ning 2018). These documents guarantee workers' rights in name, but it is hard for most to obtain all of them. Hence such permits may be regarded as an institutionalized trap, placing workers in a vulnerable situation.

The most notorious is the temporary residence permit, as we can see in Xiao's description in *Dictionary*:

“暂住证”已成了打工者词典中面目可憎的贬义词。这个词吸附了三亿多农民工近二十年来的所有屈辱和血泪，它是刺在内心深处的黥刑，是一声游荡于珠三角旷夜里悲绝的嘶鸣。[...] “蹲下，趴着，跪着，他妈的，交赎金，进去，打死你，饿死你，我操，干活，修路去，一群猪，滚”，这些词是“暂住证”的词语链条上常用的扩展词汇。  
(237-238)

The "temporary residence permit" has become a derogatory term in the dictionary of migrant workers. It has absorbed all the humiliation, blood, and tears of more than 300 million migrant workers in the past two decades. It was a criminal mark tattooed deep inside the migrant workers' hearts, a mournful cry echoing in the night in the Pearl River Delta. [...] "Squat down, lie down, kneel down, goddammit, pay the ransom, step inside [a makeshift detention area], kill you, starve you, fuck you, go to work, build some roads, a bunch of pigs, scram!" Those are some of the frequently used extended vocabulary of the "temporary residence permit". (237-38)

Xiao's entry brings to light the dehumanizing conditions faced by factory workers outside the factory grounds, where they will be subjected to abuse, penalties, incarceration, etc. if they are unable to show the required documents. Instead of directly explaining what the temporary residence permit is or what its purpose is, Xiao foregrounds the workers' extreme hatred of it.

Notably, he also abandons the objective and calm tone which he uses in the entry on “assembly line”, and employs emotional and more notably literary language instead. First, the combination of “absorb” and “blood and tears” reminds the readers of the bloodthirsty leech, bringing to mind how security officers will suddenly attack and mob migrant workers under the pretext of checking their temporary residence permit. Then by linking the permit to the ancient punishment of tattooing criminals and to migrant workers’ mournful cries, it demonstrates the psychological trauma and grief of migrant workers caused by the temporary residence permit. In the end, Xiao presents a series of expressions that are associated with temporary residence. Most are commands, mixed with insults and threats, highlighting the sharp contrast between the speakers’ (the security officers’) superiority and the helplessness and vulnerability of the workers. In just a few words, the extended vocabulary not only reflects the form of the dictionary but also outlines the inhuman abuse of migrant workers and their feelings of humiliation, injustice, loss, and marginalization in the southern industrial cities.

Besides the institutional traps, migrant workers in southern industrial cities are also vulnerable to various crimes, whether they are newcomers or whether they have worked there for many years. In Fang’s *Flower*, the urban space outside the factory grounds is dangerous for workers. The protagonist herself encounters illegal cab drivers who ask outrageous prices as soon as she sets foot in Dongguan; she almost falls into a scam intended to cheat workers out of their money; her friends go to the bank to withdraw money and are immediately robbed; and there are many more examples of such victimization. While the institutionalized traps lead to both the physical and psychological suffering of factory workers, the crimes in Fang’s *Flower* mainly target their hard-earned money. In this respect, the factory premises are safer, because there no one will check the workers’ temporary residence permits, and there are few financial traps or robberies. Thus, life “on the outside” in the cities pressures newly arrived potential workers into finding a job in the factory as soon as possible and discourages them from leaving the factory grounds.

## 2.2 *Inside the factory grounds: work-related injuries*

However, once workers are inside the factory environment, they will find that the safety of the factory grounds is only relative, and they are once again in a vulnerable situation. Work-related

injuries are the most notorious danger in the factory environment. In his *Dictionary*, Xiao captures the cruelty of work-related injuries:

在制造业，人与机器经常“零距离”，机器张口除了喝油还会饮血。[...] 在工厂里所有的名词都是凶猛的动词，机床、化学品、流水线、管道和工具，都是潜伏的猛兽。模具制造重镇，人们称之为“切指城” 在电子或鞋材生产重镇，工人经常要接触有毒化学剂。在服装行业和建筑行业，尘肺是最大的危害。于是在城市的边缘出现了“尘肺村”、“中毒村”。（119）

In the manufacturing industry, humans and machines often have “zero-distance” contact. Machines open their mouths, drinking oil as well as blood. [...] All nouns [*literally* ‘words-that-name’] in the factories are potentially ferocious verbs [*literally* ‘words-that-move’]: machine tools, chemicals, assembly lines, pipes, and tools are all beasts lurking in the shadows. The mold manufacturing center’s villages have gained the nickname “finger-cutting cities.” Workers in the towns where electronics or shoe materials are produced often encounter hazardous chemicals. The clothing and construction industries pose the greatest risk for pneumoconiosis. Consequently, “pneumoconiosis villages” and “poison villages” have emerged on the outskirts of the city. (119)

With a keen insight into the harsh working environment of workers, Xiao has developed a poetics that mixes literary description with more or less straightforward depictions of social reality, to characterize the ways in which workers’ bodies are undergoing injuries and erosions. The anthropomorphic rhetoric in the combination of “open their mouths” and “drinking oil as well as blood” brings the machines to life and depicts their brutality. The various tools on the factory floor are further compared to lurking beasts, implying that workers are like sheep to the slaughter, indicating the perils of the environment and the workers’ vulnerability. Although there have been many sociological studies and media reports on migrant workers’ injuries, Xiao’s literary account stands out. The anthropomorphic technique discussed above likens the mechanical equipment in modern factories to monsters in nature and appears to transpose modern workers into an ancient arena where they are prey to animals. Such heinous situations not only illustrate the vulnerability of workers but also compel readers to consider how it is that such torture can exist in modern society. They are a striking critique of the prevalence of not just workplace injuries but especially the abusive labor relations that cause them.

After these rhetorical descriptions, Xiao changes back to a more straightforward narrative, and situates the migrant workers' vulnerability in a larger context. With places named in bitter irony after work-related injuries, such as "finger-cutting city", "pneumoconiosis village", and "poison village", he points out the huge scale and the universality of work-related injuries in the real world. As such, through a style that combines literary description with report-like depictions of social reality, his text effectively condemns the frequency and gravity of work-related injuries and establishes a solid framework for his criticism through direct descriptions of the real world.

The physical injuries and disabilities caused by machines in the factory environment, as depicted in Xiao's text, are ultimately evidence of harm caused by humans. In addition to wounds and injuries, Fang in her *Flower* calls attention to the chronic occupational diseases among workers in toxic work environments, which are difficult to detect and long-lasting. In *Flower*, when the protagonist first walks into the painting department of the factory, she is unable to breathe because of the unpleasant smell inside. Even if she breathes through her mouth, she chokes on the smell of paint. By contrast, the other workers no longer notice the unpleasant smell, because they have worked in the painting workshop for a long time and got used to it. The contrast between the acute discomfort of the newcomer and the calmness of the older employees shows the harsh environment of the painting workshop, and the steady destruction of a human being by a cruel fate. In his 2011 book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon studies "marginalized and invisible" forms of violence and puts forward the concept of slow violence, which he defines as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011:2). The toxic working environment of the painting department is a case in point. The toxicity is difficult to detect at any given moment, but the accumulation of toxicity can cause great harm to the human body over time.

Both instant violence and slow violence in the factory environment corrode the health of the workers. What makes workers especially vulnerable is that they receive little or no compensation for work-related injuries or occupational diseases. To make matters worse, they run the risk of being dismissed as a result of their lower productivity due to injury or ailment. In *Migrant Ecologies*, Zhou Xiaojing uses the notion of "disposable labor" to show the low value of the human body in China's factories and the low social status of migrant workers (Zhou



2020:50). This notion is also used by other scholars in other similar contexts, such as Golash-Boza in her 2015 book *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor and Global Capitalism*, on immigrant workers in the U.S. (Golash-Boza 2015:5). Zhou and Golash-Boza address different issues but their work is connected by the concept of disposable labor to portray workers as objects that are discarded after use. In Fang's text, the factory workers are an example of disposable labor. Young, healthy, and energetic workers become sick and disabled, and old before their time, and are eventually laid off. Thus, instant violence, slow violence, and the disposability of labor combine to put factory workers in a deeply vulnerable situation.

In fact, in Fang's *Flower*, the institutionalized traps outside the factory grounds and the threats that loom inside are not strictly unconnected, but together constitute what amounts to a matter of life or death for the workers. After being fired and pushed back into the world outside, workers will be checked by government security officers for their temporary residence permits. As such, the government and the factories collaborate to squeeze the living space of workers in the southern industrial cities, so that when they are sacked, all they can do is return to their hometowns.

In an article on contemporary Chinese factories, Guo Yuhua 郭于华 and Huang Binhuan 黄斌欢 point out that, by attracting migrant workers to cities and trapping their parents and children in the countryside through the rural-urban division, the reproduction of labor power in China has been split. That is, the maintenance and renewal of labor power are carried out in different geographical locations and against institutional backgrounds, which effectively reduces the cost of industrial production (Guo and Huang 2014:55). Following this line of thinking, we can see that, in Fang's text, the phenomenon of disposable labor is also a manifestation of this "splitting" of the labor power reproduction process. Driving the aging, sick, and otherwise "unneeded" workers out of the factory grounds and forcing them to return to the countryside transfers care duties from the city to the countryside, thus reducing the labor costs in the industrial zones.

### 2.3 Lack of solidarity

The vulnerability of the factory-worker characters in Xiao's and Fang's texts also results from a lack of solidarity among themselves. Xiao's text shows that the first obstacle to workers' solidarity is the hierarchy within the factory environment, which divides what is a heterogeneous

worker population to begin with into even more diverse groups. In his *Dictionary*, the entry of “work clothes” offers an example:

品质部工衣是黄色衬衫...黄色在安全标志中是注意、醒目的意思。[...] QC 员穿着黄色，似乎也暗含着权力和注意。生产部的工衣是灰色的，灰尘、落叶、荒漠、风沙、弥天大雾、贫穷和失望都是灰色的，是那么不起眼，灰色是大地上最普遍也最普通的颜色。[...] 为了区分新员工，工厂给新员工佩戴一枚绿色的臂章，绿色是新鲜，是未成熟...从管理的角度来说，这是重点管理和帮扶对象。[...] 也时刻暗示着员工本人：加把劲吧，你还是新人。

The work clothes of the quality department are yellow shirts. [...] Yellow means caution and eye-catching in safety signs. [...] The quality controllers wear yellow, which also seems to imply power and caution. The work clothes of the production department are gray. Dust, fallen leaves, deserts, sandstorms, heavy fog, poverty, and disappointment are all gray. Gray is so inconspicuous, it is the most common and ubiquitous color on earth. [...] To differentiate new employees from existing ones, the factory assigns a green armband to the new hires. Green symbolizes freshness and inexperience. [...] From a management perspective, the color green signifies a focus on guiding and supporting, [...]. It also always reminds the new employees themselves: Work hard, you are still a newcomer. (126-127)

According to Xiao’s astute observation, the factory’s abstract power dynamics are embodied in the colors of work clothes. Xiao’s literary representation of power dynamics inside the factories is gripping because it renders abstract concepts concrete, through metonymy (work clothes as representing the one who wears them) and association. For example, when describing the gray work clothes of the production department, Xiao first lists a series of small but numerous gray objects (dust, fallen leaves, sandstorms, etc.). They are easily associated with the enormous number of individuals in the production department, and readers will readily accept this association and regard production department employees as being at the bottom of the power hierarchy. As such, the factory’s hidden power relations become transparent and clear and the message is driven home with considerable force through the sensory channel of color.

In addition to hierarchy within the factory environment, in Fang’s text, the crowdedness of the collective dormitory is another key factor triggering conflicts among factory workers. In

Fang's *Flower*, twelve female workers share a small room with a single bathroom, and they basically have no private space. As everyone's schedule is the same, the limited space and resources in the dormitory often lead to friction and conflict among the workers in their daily activities such as washing their clothes, and practicing personal hygiene. Thus, while the collective dormitory is a money-saving accommodation for factory workers, it intensifies competition and conflicts among them. Some sociological studies 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), but the literary texts I have surveyed highlight the resulting competition and conflicts, which impede the development of group consciousness and lead to a lack of solidarity among workers.

Another factor that hinders the building of solidarity among workers in Fang's text is the high employee turnover in the factory, which makes it impossible for workers to establish long-term trust and reciprocal relationships with each other. As mentioned before, the harsh working environment and the factory's ability to dismiss workers at will make it difficult for workers to stay in the same factory for a long time. In Fang's *Flower*, the only person who is close to the protagonist in Dongguan is her best childhood friend from the same village, and the protagonist cannot build trust with other people. The Chinese proverb "The tea cools down as soon as the person is gone" appears repeatedly in Fang's *Flower*, implying that when one leaves a place, one's relationships in that place will immediately fade. It is a metaphor for the cold world of the factory environment.

### **3. Precarity: economic globalization and the value distribution chain**

A third feature of factory working life in migrant worker literature is precarity, a state of persistent socioeconomic insecurity in regard to employment, income, and related issues such as stability in the material conditions of life, such as housing. On the issue of factory workers' precarity, the most common argument is that many are excluded from local social security because of China's household registration system, so they end up in unprotected employment situations without adequate formal contracts (Smith and Pun 2018; Choi 2018; Chen 2020; Hu 2021). This argument attributes factory workers' precarity to institutional factors such as government policy and factory owners' business models and then condemns the government or the factory or both.

By contrast, Wang Shiyue's short story "The Nine Linked Rings", offers a new perspective. By situating the factory workers' condition in the larger context of industrialization and globalization, Wang's text concentrates on the complex interrelatedness of workers, factory management, and government, and draws attention to the deeper systemic precarity of factory workers, which he depicts as essentially intractable and uncontrollable.

### *3.1 The ecosystem of the southern industrial zone*

Instead of highlighting one or two workers' personal experiences, Wang focuses on a southern industrial town where tens of thousands of factory workers live. Bringing to mind the "migrant ecologies" in Zhou Xiaojing's book, he regards the industrial zone as an ecosystem and vividly describes its construction process:

这工业区的厂并不多，差不多是以峻阖厂为龙头。[...] 其余的小厂，差不多是围着峻阖厂而生的。一个工业区，有两万来工人，人多了，傍着工业区，就成了一条街，主要做外来工的生意。[...] 网吧、小旅店、服装店、餐馆、卖菜的、卖水果的、卖饰品的.....形成生态链，唇齿相依。

There are not many factories in this industrial zone; Junhe Factory is basically the dragon's head [*i.e. it plays a leading role*]. [...] The rest of the smaller factories mainly depend on the Junhe Factory. There are around 20,000 workers in this industrial zone. With so many people, a street has come into being next to the industrial area, mainly doing business with migrant workers. [...] Internet cafes, small hotels, clothing stores, restaurants, vegetable sellers, fruit sellers, and accessories sellers . . . form an ecological chain, depending on each other like lips and teeth.  
(63)

With the Junhe Factory functioning as the cornerstone, the other smaller factories, migrant workers, and a commercial street form an economically interdependent ecosystem.

Wang's text demonstrates the complicated and dynamic interdependence or mutual restraint relationships among people in the industrial zone, which resemble that of various organisms in an ecosystem. For instance, Liuzhi, a gangster who collects protection money from hawkers, is in an awkward position when he falls in love with a hawker's daughter, a factory worker at the Junhe Factory. Another character, Huang Erhao, the security officer of the Junhe

Factory, has to prevent hawkers from entering the factory grounds for commercial activities—but at the same time, he is their landlord and so part of his income indirectly comes from these commercial activities. Like this, various groups in this industrial town such as factory owners, factory workers, restaurant owners, hawkers, urban management personnel, and gangsters depend on each other, like the “linked rings” in the title of the work.

Notably, there is no overly antagonistic relationship among people in Wang’s text, as we can see in the character of a security guard named Liu San. Migrant worker literature generally depicts security guards as negative characters who are feared and hated by migrant workers, as they often check workers’ temporary residence permits and confiscate hawkers’ stalls, and so on (Chen 2013:54). In Wang’s text, however, Liu San is a motivated young man who is lenient with the hawkers, and he often lectures them instead of maliciously confiscating their wares. Despite being sympathetic towards migrant workers, he cannot but beat up a hawker under the threat of the deputy security captain, as this is deemed to be a responsibility that comes with the job. This later causes him to feel guilty. Liu is a perfect illustration of the power of literature in that he is a complex and indeed a contradictory, conflicted character, with his violent expulsion of the hawkers out of the factory grounds as a case in point. This is not something he wants to do, but it is forced upon him, as it were, by his duties as a security officer. This reminds us of Charles A. Laughlin’s insightful remark on labor reportage literature that: “physical abuse and oppression . . . come not from the evil or malice of their overseers but from the cold logic of the larger machine of which they are all a part” (Laughlin 2002:128). Instead of exploring the individual good and evil, Wang emphasizes the relation a person’s position and their actions, indicating that the oppressive behavior is not caused by inherent evil but is determined by their position in the system.

In a similar vein, by treating the industrial zone as an ecosystem, the antagonistic relationship between the factory and the workers is also rendered more complex, away from binary dichotomies and closer to the messiness of real life. The text rarely mentions the hardships faced by the workers, and even praises the contributions of the factory:

峻崗廠亦是本鎮經濟支柱，且不说他納稅幾何，只是這廠里上萬員工，便生生帶活一條街，直接創造的就業機會就是萬余，間接創造的就業機會，就不好估算了。(60)

The Junhe Factory is also the backbone of the town's economy. Aside from its substantial tax contributions, its vast workforce, which numbers tens of thousands, alone sustains the commercial street. The factory provides over ten thousand direct employment opportunities, and the indirect employment opportunities are not easy to estimate. (60)

Through the eyes of a mid-level manager who is also a migrant worker, the author points out that the Junhe Factory is the cornerstone of the ecosystem of this industrial zone; workers and small business owners all depend on the factory to survive. By emphasizing the economic contribution of the factory, Wang's description here is closer to the discourse of the government and the media, and stands out conspicuously among migrant worker literature, which tends to focus more on the factory's exploitation of workers.

Because of this, Wang Shiyue has been criticized for sympathizing with capitalists and abandoning his original vantage point as a migrant worker (Liu 2015:149). I submit that a more rewarding perspective opens up if we view Wang as neither on the side of the factory nor intentionally covering up the exploitation of workers. Rather, he mobilizes the powers of literature to call attention to the complexity of the relationship between workers and the factory, showing that to some extent, the fate of workers is bound to the factory in the ecosystem of this industrial zone and in the larger migrant ecology of global industrialization.

### *3.2 The migrant ecology and economic globalization*

The turning point in Wang's story is the suicide of the general manager of the Junhe Factory, which happens just two hours before the workers' planned strike for overtime payment. Instead of getting compensation, the workers receive the news of the factory's closure during the strike and their emotions change from ecstasy to "grief, panic, and feeling overwhelmed" (99). The dramatic change in the workers' sentiment shows the complexity of the relationship between workers and the factory and the difficulty of "managing" this relationship, especially for the workers. The effects of this turn of events on the local socio-economic ecosystem are further demonstrated in the rapid decline of the factory zone after the Junhe factory announces its closure:

峻阖厂宣布倒闭的第三天，政府就做出决定，由政府垫付所有员工工资。拿到工资后，随之而来的，是工人撤退大潮。几天时间，原本热闹喧嚣的工业区，变得冷冷清清。依

附着工业区而生的出租屋群落，网吧，小旅店，服装店，餐馆，卖菜的，卖水果的，卖饰品的，都失去了依托。

On the third day after the announcement of the closure of the Junhe factory, the government decided to advance the wages of all employees. After the workers received their wages, they took off in waves. The once bustling and noisy industrial zone became deserted in a few days. All the rental housing communities, internet cafes, small hotels, clothing stores, restaurants, vegetable sellers, fruit sellers, and accessories sellers that depended on the industrial zone had the ground pulled from under their feet. (100)

Since the factory is the cornerstone of the ecosystem, its closure immediately causes the once vibrant factory zone to lose its vitality. Factory workers lose their jobs, and so do the small business owners who lose their customers. In the ecosystem of the industrial zone, the factory closure impacts the whole social structure. The workers' fate is bound to the factory, and the factory's insecurity is among the causes of their precarity.

The closure of the Junhe Factory also sheds light on the larger migrant ecology of global industrialization and the factory's insecure situation in such an ecosystem. Although based in a city in mainland China, the Junhe factory is a Hong Kong-owned company that is highly dependent on the US market. We can infer from Wang's text that, affected by the disastrous impact of the 2008 financial crisis, the Hong Kong-based board of directors decided to shut down the Junhe factory. From this perspective, the workers' precarity arises out of global capitalist economy, as capital circulates freely between countries in search of cheap labor and low tax rates, and quits when there is no profit.

Moreover, despite being the cornerstone of the ecosystem of this southern industrial zone, the Junhe Factory is at the low end of the larger global industrial structure. Because of its labor-intensive nature and its production mode of contract processing, it reaps little benefit in the global value chain, which makes it especially susceptible to the effects of the financial crisis. Thus, the Junhe Factory's low benefit and its workers' precarity are partly determined by the volatile global market, uncontrollable capital circulation, and its own inferior position in the global value distribution chain.

While many scholars believe that the migrant workers' precarious situation is the result of the joint forces of government and capital (Sun 2012a; Pun 2005:23), Wang's text suggests that

the fate of workers is unlikely to improve even when the government challenges capital. He describes how the workers of the Weitai Factory, the second-largest factory in the industrial zone after the Junhe Factory, go on strike and successfully receive compensation with tacit support from the government—which is rare, because the government usually tends to favor the investors in labor disputes, in order to attract investment and protect the investment environment. The workers are happy since they have won the lawsuit against the factory. However, through a middle manager's explanation, Wang reveals that the result of the workers' victory gave no cause for optimism: "It's a different time and a different situation. The Weitai Factory is a labor-intensive enterprise with serious pollution problems, and it will be eliminated now" (93). In this case, the image of the government has changed from being an accomplice of the factory to being supportive of the workers. But ironically, the government's intervention has actually made the workers' situation worse, as what appears to be its support for the workers is in fact a disguised elimination of low-end enterprises with pollution problems. Therefore, the workers' victory is only temporary. Once the factory is eliminated, they will lose their jobs.

Whether owing to the financial crisis or the change in the government's attitude towards low-end manufacturing, for the workers in Wang's text, dangerous factors such as factory closure and the loss of jobs are difficult to predict and uncontrollable. Most workers don't look beyond their daily struggle to things like the financial crisis, even if these will in fact have a profound impact on their lives, and those who see the big picture can't do anything but fear and worry. As critic Ye Jun 叶君 points out: "in Wang Shiyue's writings, almost nothing is stable, and the only certainty is the fear that cannot be relieved for a moment" (Ye 2021:58). Wang's skilled, detailed, empathetic narrative makes the effect of precarity on countless human lives acutely palpable.

On the issue of Chinese factory workers' precarity, Wang's fiction does not offer an answer. In reality, the Chinese government's answer is to actively promote industrial upgrading and transformation, and its logic is that only by occupying a place at the top of the global industrial value chain can it raise factory profits and worker incomes. But industrial upgrading is far from easy. As Scott Rozelle and Natalie Hell point out in their 2020 book *Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise*, the low education levels in rural China are a serious impediment to China's industrial development because workers with low levels of education cannot cope with the demands of industrial upgrading (Rozelle and Hell 2020). At the



same time, foreign capital and the manufacturing industry are leaving China for Vietnam, Thailand, and other places in Southeast Asia in search of cheaper labor (Zhang 2021; Jiang and Xiong 2020; Gao 2017), replicating the plight of Chinese workers in other countries (Siu 2015). That is to say, the nationality of the employees has changed, but their precarious situation has not. Perhaps, the precarity of workers is inevitable, as Laughlin points out in his critique of capitalism: “The cruelty is not personal, nor does it represent some tragic, universal aspect of the human condition; it is a systemic cruelty experienced collectively” (Laughlin 2002:128). Thus, in hard-hitting images of individual experience, Wang’s text reaffirms that precarity has always characterized working people’s lives, and has been taken to new heights—or, depths—by the logic of industrial capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the literary representation of migrant workers by focusing on factory work. Based on texts by Xiao Xiangfeng, Fang Yiluo, and Wang Shiyue, I have addressed salient features of factory life—exhaustion, vulnerability, and precarity—from the perspective of the workers and their relation to the local factory environment as well as to the larger context of industrialization and globalization.

With the I-narrators, both Xiao’s and Fang’s texts offer rich descriptions of workers’ exhaustion and vulnerability in the factory environment through individual experiences. By closely reading Xiao’s and Fang’s texts, I have argued that—driven by the goal of efficiency and profit—the physical, regulatory, and cultural environments of the factories in the southern industrial cities exert a high degree of control over workers through the all-round monitoring of workers’ time, body, and mind. As a result, workers are reduced to machine-like cheap labor units and live an arduous, exhausting, and numb life. Moreover, the hazardous social space outside the factory grounds, the perilous working environment on the factory floor, and the lack of solidarity among the workers themselves, as portrayed in Xiao’s and Fang’s texts, together contribute to the vulnerability of factory workers. By taking the whole industrial zone as an ecosystem and situating the factory workers’ condition in the larger context of industrialization and globalization, Wang’s text shows the complicated relation among workers, the factories, and the government. His text illustrates that the fate of workers is partly bound to the factory, and the precarity of workers derives from the highly uncertain global market, the uncontrollable capital

circulation, and the disadvantaged position of China's low-end factories in the global value chain.

It is worth pointing out that these texts depict these salient features of factory life—exhaustion, vulnerability, and precarity—not as unconnected but as closely interrelated factors. They have been discussed separately here only because they reflect the different aspects of the labor process and to structure the argument. Together, they highlight the plight of factory workers in China's modernization process and the ways in which literature can help us understand their condition.