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

As the reader may recall from the preface to this study, my research motivation stems from the deep bond I have with my hometown. In rural Henan, farming has come to be associated with backbreaking labor and a sense of hopelessness, leaving *dagong* as the primary and often the only option for earning a livelihood. As one of the few college students from my village, the first part-time job I found after I obtained my bachelor's degree was also to *dagong*, working in an electronics factory in a southern city. This firsthand experience as a migrant worker, coupled with the stories I heard from fellow migrant workers in my village, sparked my curiosity to delve deeper into the lives of migrant workers. Given my academic background in Chinese literature, it was natural for me to turn to literature as a means to seek answers. Consequently, I made the decision to focus my PhD dissertation on the study of Chinese migrant worker literature.

Using personal interest and curiosity as motivation for a research project is a straightforward process. However, transforming that personal and emotional motivation into a research topic that aligns with academic norms and extends beyond individual interests to contribute to the broader field of research is no easy task. This was my first challenge, and this is how I landed on the two research questions I have addressed in this thesis:

•What are key themes and techniques in literary representations of Chinese migrant workers in 21st-century Chinese prose?

•How do these representations relate to portrayals of migrant workers in government, news media, and social science discourse?

The themes I identified include the rural, the urban couple, the factory, and resistance. Each represents an important aspect of migrant workers' lives and provides a valuable perspective on migrant worker literature. My research also shows how literature is distinct from other discourses. For example, literary representations have a notable power to rehumanize marginalized migrant workers. In Liang Hong's *China in One Village*, for instance, we see what a migrant worker means to their spouse who has remained in the village. Migrant workers are not merely faceless individuals, but cherished family members who are both essential and missed. Moreover, literary representations help challenge and dismantle stereotypes stemming from the other discourses. In Wang Shiyue's novella, the character of the small boss, who was once a migrant worker, exhibits real, human complexity, as he sympathizes with migrant workers at the

same time as contributing to their exploitation. Similarly, in Wang Anyi's short story, Liu Jianhua deviates from the stereotypical portrayal of a migrant worker, as he is highly skilled, enjoys life, and appears to steer clear of hardship. Furthermore, the use of various literary devices in these representations, such as metaphor, personification, satire, symbolism and so on, creates vivid and memorable stories that effectively convey information and leave a lasting impression on readers. Overall, by employing rich literary techniques and provoking thought on overlooked issues, literary representations of migrant workers offer an alternative viewpoint compared to other discourses, such as government discourse, media discourse, and academic discourse.

My research has contributed to the field of migrant worker literature by using new materials, adopting a new perspective, and adding new findings to the existing knowledge. First, it draws attention to the understudied genre of prose in migrant worker literature. For a new perspective, I have included texts about migrant workers but written by non-migrant worker writers in my research, which is an enrichment considering that English-language research to date has hardly covered this terrain. Additionally, I highlight the importance of the rural narrative, to complement the urban perspective often adopted by most research.

This approach has allowed me to arrive at new findings. For instance, by studying the often-neglected topic of the rural, I find that contrary to other discourses, the rural background is not merely a burden for migrant workers but also a source of wealth. For example, in Sun Huifen's novel, Jikuan uses his rural memories to fight against the sufferings of urban life and uses his rural habitus to transform the urban space, and then gets a chance to start a business. Additionally, by studying the non-migrant worker writer Jing Yongming's short stories, I find that, literary representations of migrant workers' struggles suggest that economic constraints emerge as a greater obstacle to the urban integration of migrant workers than institutional restrictions. For example, in Jing Yongming's work, Xiuping is not even free to raise her voice in the couple's rented urban dwelling, and they cannot afford a place of their own where they can feel free.

Beyond drawing the reader's attention to these points, I truly hope to have kindled their curiosity and interest in not just migrant worker literature but also the broader range of issues surrounding migrant workers in contemporary Chinese society. I hope to have shown that

Chinese migrant worker literature offers a wealth of knowledge and perspectives that deepen our understanding of their experiences and challenges, toward creating a fairer society.

The research process has had a profound impact on both my personal growth and my intellectual development. Above all, it has provided me with invaluable skills and knowledge, especially in the realm of the particular kind of intellectual endeavor that is academic research. I have also found myself confronted with exhilarating moments of intellectual breakthrough *and* significant challenges, including all the ups and downs that many PhD researchers go through as they make their way into the scholarly community. But I have pulled through, and looking back I like to think that all of this has been not just necessary but also beneficial for my personal growth, and that it has instilled in me a sense of resilience and equipped me with the tools to see how I might help my future students deal with all this.

This study suggests several possible topics for future research. First, while my research mainly focuses on texts from the first decade of the 21st century, a critical period for the development of migrant worker literature, it is essential to acknowledge that this scope is not comprehensive. Recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the retraction of globalization have profoundly impacted the lives of people, prominently including Chinese migrant workers, as many of them are engaged in export-related jobs: we need scholarship on new literary work amidst this rapidly evolving social backdrop. Second, conducting national or regional comparisons would provide valuable insights, as labor migration and precarity are global phenomena with locally divergent manifestations. Third, examining the role of technology and digital media in shaping migrant worker literature is another promising avenue for future research. With the advancement of communication technologies, migrant workers now have new means of expressing their stories and experiences, and we will learn a great deal from analyzing the impact of digital platforms on migrant worker narratives. Lastly, it would be valuable to explore the reception and impact of migrant worker literature within Chinese society and beyond. Investigating how these literary works are received by different general audiences, policymakers, and scholars can shed light on the broader social and cultural implications of migrant worker literature, as a striking and fascinating genre that is very much of our time.