



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

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4170525>

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

Summary in English

This thesis studies the representation of China's internal migrant workers in literature, as distinct from various other discourses. It analyzes key themes and techniques used in literary representations of Chinese migrant workers in 21st-century Chinese prose. Additionally, it investigates the relationship between these literary representations and the portrayals of migrant workers in governmental, news media, and social science discourse.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the historical context for migrant worker literature by introducing the notion of *dagong* (working for the boss, selling your labor), defining migrant worker literature, and charting its emergence in contemporary China.

Chapter 2 shows the complex connection between migrant workers and the countryside, through an investigation of texts by Liang Hong, Sun Huifen, and Luo Weizhang. Liang's text shows that rural people 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. Luo's narrative 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*.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the literary representation of city-based migrant worker couples, in works by Liang Xiaosheng, Wei Wei, and Jing Yongming. Salient features of city-based migrant workers' couples as represented in migrant worker literature include the phenomenon of the temporary couple, cramped and crowded living space, and rural-urban marriages. For most of the protagonists, economic adversity is the biggest obstacle to their survival in the urban space, indicating that economic constraints become the new obstacle to the urban integration of migrant workers, even more so than institutional restrictions of residence rights and so on.

Chapter 4 examines the literary representation of migrant workers by focusing on the experience of factory workers in works by Xiao Xiangfeng, Fang Yiluo, and Wang Shiyue. I argue that exhaustion, vulnerability, and precarity are salient features of factory life. Both

Xiao's and Fang's texts offer rich descriptions of workers' exhaustion and vulnerability through individual experiences. The physical, regulatory, and cultural environments of the factories exert a high degree of control over workers through the all-round monitoring of workers' time, body, and mind. 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. Wang's text shows the more 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.

Chapter 5 turns to the representation of migrant workers' agency in *resisting* social injustice, with a focus on a motif of resistance and revenge, in works by You Fengwei, Wang Shiyue, Fang Yiluo, Wang Anyi, and Liang Hong. In migrant worker literature, migrant workers' resistance and revenge are generally unsuccessful. The cost of using personal violence is often greater than enduring injustice. Seeking legal recourse may be met with further harm due to collusion between government and the corporate world. The seemingly successful everyday resistance 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. Such acts of resistance 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.

In all, four significant themes in migrant worker literature—the rural narrative, the urban couple, the factory, and resistance—are identified, each offering valuable perspectives on the lives of migrant workers. Through literary representations, migrant workers are no longer relegated to mere statistics or stereotypes but emerge as multifaceted human beings with complex emotions, desires, and struggles. This demonstrates literature's unique ability to rehumanize and shows that literature, in contrast to other discourses, such as government, media, or academic discourses, offers a nuanced and alternative perspective, enriching the discourse on migrant workers and prompting critical reflection on societal norms and prejudices.