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Strangers in a Familiar City: Picun Migrant-worker Poets in the Urban Space of Beijing

Federico Picerni

Abstract

Urbanisation and rural-urban labour mobility are two founding traits of China's contemporary society and socio-economic model. The connection between the two and the peculiar social mobility control system still in force, which bars non-urban residents from accessing basic services in the city, creates a new form of social stratification between the "centre" and the "periphery" of urban society, as well as a new subject in the city – one not fully urban, nor still peasant, but remaining an outsider in the city. Migrant-worker communities have formed, one of the foremost being Beijing's Picun urban village. In this paper, I analyse a corpus of poems published online in recent years by members of a literature group of migrant workers based in Picun. Reading them as a case of subjective representation of the social space of the city and the authors' positioning in its web of social relations, and adopting a socio-literary approach, I particularly focus on the relation with the rural home, urban alienation and anomie, and the effort for symbolic recognition, locating this production in the larger spheres of contemporary migrant-worker literature and urban literature. By doing so, I demonstrate that such a literature challenges the coherence and uniformity of the city's "text" (and identity), offering a multi-layer perspective of the socio-cultural production of urban space.

Keywords: Beijing, Picun, migrant-workers, literature, poems, urban space

If it is true, as David Frisby puts it, that the modern city is a place where strangers meet, textual representation can tell us a lot about how this encounter is perceived in the subjective realm (and the city itself may be quite a stranger to newcomers). With this in mind, this article endeavours to examine a set of poems authored by Chinese rural-urban migrants to determine how the city of Beijing is perceived by this specific kind of agent, the stranger to the city for institutional reasons even without crossing the nation's boundaries.

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This may offer new or alternative perspectives on our understanding of the relation of politics and poetics of the urban space, both in China and elsewhere. As remarked by Liu Dongwu, himself an “outsider” poet and self-made scholar, “in turning the city into language, literature continuously gives the city – as a material entity – a rich symbolic meaning and cultural implication, and it influences our understanding of the actual city and its real features” (Liu 2012: 96). My enquiry mainly revolves around two questions: How do migrant workers, a largely invisible army of cheap labour, employ contemporary forms of artistic expression? How do they read the city through their peripheral, marginalised experience?

Such a vast army of rural-urban migrant workers is one of the most distinctive features of post-1978 Chinese society. The “floating population” (流动人口) started flooding the rapidly-developing cities of China’s coastal areas in the 1980s, after the beginning of the Reform and Opening Up policy and land de-collectivisation. Forty years later, it officially counts 244 million people (National Bureau of Statistics 2018), although these numbers do not account for unregistered migrants and cut across different generations with different approaches to migration, family and urban life (Huang 2016: 56–57, 230–231). Beijing in particular, now closer than ever to becoming a *Blade Runner*-reminiscent megacity, saw its floating population reach 8.07 million in 2016, a relatively lower number than the previous year, probably set to further decrease due to more stringent quotas established by the municipal government (Beijing Bureau of Statistics 2017). The “floating population” comprises extremely varied members, ranging from people moving to the city to attend university (and possibly become accomplished urban citizens) to poor workers looking for better job prospects in the city who end up doing other menial jobs, often exploitative and precarious. Migrants’ conditions are worsened by the lack of an urban household registration, the *hukou* (户口), which bars them from accessing basic urban services. Such migrant workers, variously called “farmer-workers” (农民工) or “precarious workers” (打工者), and who at times self-identify as “new workers” (新工人), also depending on the actual job they do, form the object of this paper.¹

Some of them have long started writing novels and poetry. Today’s literature abounds with stories on and by the city’s underclasses, and commentaries are also following suit in huge numbers. In China, Liu Dongwu (2012) has

1 Caution is needed when stepping on the slippery ground of terminology. Terms like “migrant” or “floating people” might be too broad (young people coming to Beijing to study might also consider themselves migrants, and yet be totally separate from precarious workers in terms of social standing, lifestyle and ideas). Conversely, definitions like “precarious workers” (打工者) – which van Crevel (2017: 246) proposes translating with the Australian colloquialism “battler”, while also remarking how “working-for-the-boss” would be the most literal translation (Pun 2005: 12) – or “peasant-workers” (农民工) are refuted by most in Picun, who prefer using the term “new workers” (新工人; Huang 2016: 101), initially employed by Lü Tu (2012; see also Zhang 2019), although the previous two terms often appear in the poems and other works by Picun authors. For the purpose of this paper, I am going to stick to “migrant workers”.

written probably the most comprehensive work on the topic to date, crossing genres and themes, and engaging in a significant theoretical discussion on the question of authorhood and identity. Scholarship is on the increase also outside the country. Inwood (2011) sees migrant-worker poetry as the re-emergence of socially-oriented poetic responsibility in China, while Sun (2012) discusses how social commitment and literary value intermingle problematically in this poetry and in the related commentary. Gong (2012) focuses on its critique of the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation. Jaguścik (2014) and Dooling (2017) concentrate on migrant women's production, the first linking it with the broader scene of contemporary women's writing in China, and the latter highlighting it as a valid form of counter-narrative (with a strong emphasis on authors' urban experience); another intersection between migrant and gay subjectivities is explored by Bao (2018). Pozzana (2019) reads migrant-worker poetry as a space for subjective existence for the otherwise invisible, and connects it to the intellectual questions and poetic exploration spearheaded by the earlier trend of Misty poetry, whereas Li and Rong (2019) highlight the identity quandary in female migrants' "autobiographical" poetry. Van Crevel (2017a, 2017b: 38–44, 2019a, 2019b) is conducting a vast analysis of migrant-worker poetry, particularly discussing authors' creativity vis-à-vis the broader concept itself and their representativeness and position within contemporary Chinese poetry and literary establishments. Goodman's significant scholarly work on the translation of migrant-worker poetry should also be cited (2017, 2019).

The experience of social disparity, alienation and anomie in the city is undoubtedly a very relevant part of migrant-worker literature, and therefore a path worthy of further exploration. As a case study in this direction, I am going to focus on the literary production of the migrant community of Picun, an urban village on the outskirts of Beijing with a lively artistic scene. More precisely, I am going to examine the poems in the *Workers' Poems and Songs* (劳动者的诗与歌) series published on the WeChat blog of the Picun Workers' Home (皮村工友之家), concentrating in particular on their literary interpretation of the city and its social world.

1. Picun's literature group and literary Beijing

Picun, a "migrant heterotopia", lies on the outskirts of Beijing, closer to the Sixth Ring than the already-remote Fifth of the city's beltways. It is an "urban village", or "village-in-the-city" (城中村), the name used to designate former rural settlements that have been incorporated into the city following its expansion. Given the affordable prices of rents and other services, urban villages are the preferred destinations of migrant workers when they arrive in the city

(Wu 2016, Zhan 2018). It is noteworthy that this topological, in addition to social, marginalisation of migrant workers is also one of the aspects of the re-emergence of certain features of the pre-socialist urban divisions in China (Wang et al. 2009: 958).

Picun's thriving migrant cultural life, or "new-worker literature and arts" (新工人文艺), owes much to the New Workers' Arts Troupe, which moved to the village in 2005, after it was established in 2002 under a different name by Sun Heng, Wang Dezhi and Xu Duo, migrant workers themselves. The group runs the Picun Workers' Home, a service-providing space through which it organises several cultural events, festivals and writing contests, including the New Workers' Art Festival and the Precarious Workers' Spring Festival Gala. It also runs a Migrant Workers' Culture and Art Museum, schools for children and night classes for adults. The appropriation of this slice of urban space and the cultural self-management effected there is indeed a significant anomaly in the structure of the Chinese metropolis, although not in an antagonist relation with the state, also considering that it can count on the support from the local administration, at least to some degree – it would hardly be possible otherwise (Qiu / Wang 2012, Huang 2016: 93–134, Yang 2017, Lang 2018).

And finally, there is a literature group (文学小组), created in September 2014 on the initiative of Xiao Fu, a former migrant worker herself who still acts as its factotum, which aims to "provide a space for study and discussion to workers interested in literature" (Zhang 2019b: 320). It has some printed publications, such as multiple-author anthologies (*Picun Literature*), some individual collections, and, since May 2019, a bimonthly journal called *New-Worker Literature*.² By virtue of the unstable lives of migrant workers, who constitute the vast majority of its members (although its weekly activities sporadically see students and occasional comers among its audience), participation is highly irregular. The group enjoyed unprecedented notoriety after April 2017, when one of its members, house-care worker Fan Yusu, hit China's and international headlines with her acclaimed short autobiography "I Am Fan Yusu" (我是范雨素).³

Every week, the group holds talks or lectures given by high school or university teachers and other individuals who go to Picun as volunteers. One of

2 All the above-mentioned publications, including the journal, are considered "for internal exchange" (内部交流), therefore not for sale. This is a strategy to avoid possible risks. The same was done by avant-garde poetry journals in the 1980s, and generally by unofficial publications. Van Crevel's essay comparing the Picun museum with other worker-culture museums throughout China contains also an analysis of the literature group's poetry and activities (2019b).

3 The story was first posted on the website Noonstory.com, under a Shanghai media outlet, and it quickly became a sensation, being shared countless times before it was taken down, 48 hours later. Censorship, however, could not prevent it from going viral, and even a hashtag appeared, #women dou shi Fan Yusu (我们都是范雨素, "We are all Fan Yusu"), reflecting a growing interest in the lives of those at the margins of China's economic boom. Abroad, *The Guardian* termed it a "Dickensian" tale of Chinese migrants' lives. The story was printed in the first issue of *New-Worker Literature*, two years later, with a slightly different title (Fan 2019).

the very first to take up this role was Zhang Huiyu, a professor of film and communication studies currently at Peking University, still a prominent figure in the group. Another connection with the broader literary scene is Shi Libin, editor of the influential *Beijing Literature*, who actively participates in the group's life and who appears to have been instrumental in having some Picun authors published in the journal, as well as in including some of them in the anthology *Verses of Northern Floaters* (北漂诗篇). Zhang and Shi are currently on the editorial board of *New-Worker Literature*, together with other scholars, writers and activists, mostly based in Beijing.⁴ These “outsiders” have been conceptualised in the group's publications as continuing the historical tradition of intellectuals contributing to worker writers' literary training (Zhang 2019b: 325), but they play a more than ancillary role, as they also act to a certain extent as conveyer belts between the group's unprofessional authors and Beijing's cultural establishment. As a form of creative, artistic production, regardless of its (still) unprofessional status, the group's poetry should be acknowledged with its own rightful place in the broader literary scene, with which it shares several tropes and topoi, including the representation of factory labour, homesickness, displacement, frustration, alienation and, last but not least, the questioning of the socio-cultural coherence of the metropolis⁵ and the exposure to the complex undergrowth of the urban jungle. After all, this literature's birthplace (and current hotbed) were China's southernmost cities, where the earliest Special Economic Zones were established in the early 1980s.

Beijing is not an unexplored territory in contemporary urban literature. After the transition from the Maoist order, the capital also became the fictional setting where the striking and sometimes violent contradictions of post-socialist modernity unfolded. In her seminal work on artists' relation with the urban space in the post-socialist age, Visser offers a vast account of the literary (re-)imagination of cities from the late 1970s, particularly showing how Beijing was the site *par excellence* of the confrontation between the traditional and the modern. If, on the one hand, architecture, buildings, streets and the general cityscape, above all the traditional courtyards (四合院) and alleys (胡同), became concrete embodiments of an unforgotten and painfully preserved traditional identity, on the other hand, the crisis of values of the period, well exemplified by the “bohemian ethos” (Visser 2010: 139) of Wang Shuo's rampaging hooligan youth, together with the effects of China's transition to market economy and its entry into the global capitalist system, produced an urban subject plagued by anomie, estrangement and narcissism, exploring

4 Also on the editorial board sits Li Yunlei, a writer and editor of the academic journal *Theory and Critique of Literature and Arts*, author of a book on China's “subaltern” literature (Li 2014).

5 Notably, one of the earliest collections of such poems, by Bai Lianchun, was titled *Our Native Soil in the Cracks of the City* (城市縫隙里的乡土), published in 1991 in the *Shikan* poetry journal (Liu 2012: 75).

new urban life-styles and practices characterised by consumerism and unprecedented sexual transgression, as portrayed in the oeuvre of such authors as Liu Heng, Chen Ran and, later, Feng Tang. While many of these accounts came from a (local-born) middle-class perspective, new urban inequalities were unearthed by writers such as Qiu Huadong and Xu Zechen, whose characters deal with their outsider status, poverty vis-à-vis frustratingly unreachable possibilities and petty criminality. Visser concludes that “post-socialist urban fiction” reveals the “ethical dilemmas posed by consumer modernity” and the variety of ways in which individuals, left “with the burden of creating new belief systems”, cope with them (*ibid.*: 286).

If we try to connect migrant authors’ production with this background, some of the characteristics of contemporary urban literature, above all the feeling of alienation and anomie, appear to be common traits in city experience and are reflected in the production of migrant writers as well. At the same time, the unique perspective of migrant writers can offer additional and novel keys to interpret the city, highlighting in particular their own condition of class marginality, the re-articulation of the meaning of the figure of workers, and an urban experience mediated by the conditions of wage labour, with an emphasis on the contradiction between their role as the “constructors” of the city and their exclusion from it. Furthermore, migrant-worker literature’s function as social discourse, in addition to its literary value, should not be overlooked, especially since, as Sun Wanning suggests, “these narratives should be read more as accounts of the collective experience of [migrant workers] as a socially marginalised cohort” (Sun 2014: 183), a point shared by Pozzana as she asserts that the “I” in migrant-worker poetry may be interpreted as a collective “us” (Pozzana 2019: 193).

2. Social space and representation

My approach here is to consider Picun migrant poets’ literary production as a case of perception of the social world of Beijing directly by a subaltern group living at the geographical as well as social margins of the city. It may therefore be seen as an active act of reading *and* writing the city, primarily through the authors’ own direct experience of the urban space itself, and vice versa, an attempt at reading *and* writing their very condition through this same act.

The fact that none of the authors were, nor are now, professional writers actually makes them reminiscent of the “ordinary practitioners” that, in de Certeau’s words, come from “‘down below’, below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (Certeau 1984: 93). After all, they dwell at the margins of the city and their contribution to the city’s (and the country’s) progress is rarely acknowledged, pushing them below visibility’s thresholds. However, unlike

the “walkers” described by the French scholar as “follow[ing] the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (ibid.), our ordinary practitioners here make a lucid effort to read, through writing, and to realise the “inscription of the body in the order’s text” (ibid.: 130) – again, a text where they are objectively present by virtue of their labour, but that tends to hide their centrality.

The concept of social space can help us frame and make sense of how subaltern agents (or any agent, as a matter of fact) experience and interpret their surroundings. “Social space,” argues Lefebvre (1991: 77), “is produced and reproduced in connection with the forces of production and with the relations of production”. However, while it often overlaps physical space, social space is not confined by it; it reaches out to and connects other physical spaces by means of transversal (albeit hierarchical) social relations, rather than spatial relations per se. In fact, continues Lefebvre, “[w]e are confronted not by one social space but by many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces[.] *Social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another*” (ibid.: 86, Lefebvre’s italics). Such interpenetration or superimposition is made real by the cluster of networks that connect spaces (real, but also imagined and representational). While this may be particularly useful for analysing the production of authors socially located at the intersection between different spaces (primarily, city / countryside, downtown / periphery, centre / margins), what this principle implies is “that each fragment of space subjected to analysis masks not just one social relationship but a host of them” (ibid.: 88), meaning also that this juxtaposition is necessarily mediated by relations of hierarchy.

Social space, then, becomes unreadable (and “unwritable”?) if class and power relations between it and subjects, as well as between subjects themselves within it, are taken out of the picture – especially when, as in the case of migrant workers, these relations are determined by the condition of labour and what Marx would call wage slavery. These relations also contribute to determining what kind of representation is produced and by whom. Essentially in a similar manner to Lefebvre, although disagreeing with the latter’s emphasis on relations of economic production,⁶ Bourdieu describes social space as “a space of relations which is just as real as the geographical space”, but also a “field of forces” where “a set of objective power relations” is at play, which determines what position each individual agent or actor occupies (Bourdieu 1991: 230).

6 Despite their differences, I believe both can be very useful to acquire a better understanding of the concept of social space. This is particularly true in a case like the one examined in this essay, where power and production relations clearly overlap, and cultural, symbolic as well as material power relations in the city are heavily dependent on (if not the result of) production relations.

Bourdieu thus holds that the perception of a social world or, for our purposes, a space (and its representation as a result) is a two-sided coin: objectively, “properties attached to agents or institutions do not make themselves available to perception independently”, making it more difficult to discern and “de-naturalise”, so to speak, the traits of a given socio-political order; and, subjectively, “schemes of perception and evaluation susceptible of being brought into operation at a given moment, *including all those which are laid down in language* [my emphasis], are the product of previous symbolic struggles and express, in a more or less transformed form, the state of symbolic relations of power” (ibid.: 234). Consequently, social conditions, power (and class) relations and hegemonic discourses variously influence – even when they are contested – subjects’ perception and representation of their relation with the space. This does not mean, however, that the representation of a space by certain actors – namely, in our case, of Beijing by migrant worker-authors – is necessarily the mere reflection of these factors, passive and uncontested. After all, social space is a “site of co-existence of points of view” (Bourdieu 2000: 183), i.e. of ways to address and relate to the hegemonic way of life and culture, or *habitus*. What this does entail, however, is a certain influence on actors’ attitude towards the social reality around them, mainly through the experiential relation with it that finds its expression in language.

Furthermore, a logical consequence of both Lefebvre’s and Bourdieu’s theories is that the dominant symbolic system is not the only factor influencing agents’ understanding of the social space. In fact, their position in the “field of relations”, while determined by the “objective power relations” (and in the concrete case, these are represented by labour relations, as well as by institutional-bureaucratic relations, namely the *hukou*), in turn determines how agents themselves will experience, interpret and possibly critique, explicitly or implicitly, social space. In particular, the question of proximity and distance is crucial in the social space, as it helps to conceptualise it as simultaneously juxtaposed with and different from physical space.⁷ Also produced by objective conditions, understandings of one’s own symbolic-cultural proximity to and distance from other actors in the field plays a role in framing agents’, as well as groups’, position and sense of belonging in the social space as a whole. With this in mind, I tried to read the poems under analysis as a field where the hegemonic discourse and individual agency coexist, in order to investigate how these texts, possibly shaped by both, offer an original perception of the city.

7 Reed-Danahay (2015) provides a comprehensive account of the development of the ideas of proximity (or closeness) and distance in social theory, particularly stressing the fact that social and physical proximity do not necessarily align, although some thinkers, like Bourdieu himself, believed that socially distant agents tended to be also physically distant. In the essay, Reed-Danahay also suggests the possible application of the concept to migration studies.

3. Reading and analysis of the poems

The Workers' Poems and Songs⁸ series was run on the WeChat blog of Workers' Home from 2017 to 2018. It consists of 23 instalments, generally by different authors (although some have presented more than one entry), each providing the text of the poem and a recording of the author reciting it, accompanied by a song on a related theme. Some of the instalments included basic background information regarding the author and text; some were written around the time of publication, others are older and have been modified and rearranged. Most of them were previously published in the literature group's printed anthologies. My attempt at grouping them according to the main themes of each piece, although necessary due to the concrete limits of this paper, does not entirely render justice to their equally significant diversity.

3.1. "Home", nostalgia and habitus

What stands out immediately from this production is the constant sense of homesickness. Most of the poems, one way or another, deal with the issue of the author's nostalgia for the rural home, a feeling often expressed through tropes like the longing for the left-behind family or for a happy youthful past against a gloomy present. Oddly enough, but only seemingly so, our discussion on city should start from the countryside. The poem "Hometown" (故乡) by Li Ruo, a female migrant worker with more than ten years of factory labour and one of the literature group's most prolific authors, is entirely dedicated to a dream of a long by-gone childhood, so evanescent that it has to be conjured up by the unconscious mind, as made evident in the first stanza:

昨夜	Last night
我又梦回故乡	Once again I was back home ⁹ in my dreams
躺在儿时睡觉的小床上	I lay in the small bed where I would sleep my
带着满身疲惫	childhood sleeps
生活的累	My body covered with exhaustion
感情的伤	The weariness of life
	The wound of sentiments

Jin Hongyang performs a similar operation in "Mama Comes to Beijing" (妈妈来北京). The poem describes multiple attempts by the author to impress his mother with the magnificence of Beijing (where he, at the time of the poem, had worked for more than ten years), and her surprised exclamations are

8 The name is derived from the annual poetry reading held in Picun at the beginning of September, where musical pieces are also performed, hence the "songs" in the title.

9 Note that the Chinese is far more explicit here, thanks to its linguistic resources, in making "home" one with "countryside": the second character composing the word *guxiang* 故乡, "home(town/land)" or "native place", literally means "countryside, village, rural area".

revealing of the fascination that Beijing-centred national symbols and the modern lifestyle exercise on the collective imagination: “so great” (真长!) at the sight of the Great Wall, “so big” (真大!) in the overwhelming scene of Tian’anmen Square, “sorrow” (痛!) in front of Chairman Mao Zedong’s memorial hall, “so crowded” (真挤!) after chatting with other migrant workers, “so busy” (真忙!) at the end of a long evening eating out with friends. However, the structure of the poem, after five three-verse stanzas ending with the above-quoted exclamations, changes in the end:

我想留您在北京多住些时光 但您还是走了，您说 ——还是老家好！	I wish to make you stay in Beijing some more time But you insist on leaving, and you say – home remains better!
妈妈回了家乡 留下了妈的思念 带走了儿的牵挂	Mama, you have gone back home Leaving here a feeling of your absence Taking with you your worries for your child

In another poem, “On the Road Back Home” (回乡的路上), Jin projects himself on a train taking him back to his hometown, perhaps during one of the festivals when flows of Chinese people set off to reunite with their families. Here, imagery related to food (“corn cobs [my old mom] cooks for me, piping hot”; 为我煮熟的热气腾腾的苞米棒), and landscape (“flock of ducks near the lotus pond in front of our door”; 门前荷塘边的一群鸭), add up to elements symbolising the rural home.

Lefebvre characterises representational space (i.e. space experienced through imagination) “as directly lived through its associated images and symbols” (Lefebvre 1991: 39), hence the figures employed by the above-quoted poets. There is more, however. In expressing the personality and individual history of migrants, elements like the mother, childhood, the quiet of the countryside, food and even the rural landscape add up in configuring a *habitus* clash. For Bourdieu, the *habitus* is made up of interiorised lifestyles, preferences, tastes, but also rules, customs and practices that inform, through common sense, our understanding of things, and it is inseparable from the relations inscribed in the social space: Reed-Danahay (2017: 6) makes this clear by saying that “the *habitus* feels ‘at home’ and at ease if there is harmony between the criteria for social hierarchy in the social space where they are positioned and the understandings of that by the *habitus*”.

The rural–urban opposition is not only symbolic, however: it also has a raw, material side. Take “The Poetic Life of Precarious Workers” (打工者的诗意生活) by Guo Fulai:

我曾经是个农民
 碧绿的田野长满生机勃勃
 每一棵庄稼都充实我们的欢乐
 坐下来，亲一亲故乡的土坷垃
 泥土的腥味里
 唱响我们诗意的歌

I used to be a peasant
 Dark green, fields grew all around me,
 [vital and vigorous
 Every crop enriched our merriment
 Sitting, we would softly kiss the clods
 [of our native earth
 And the hard taste of the soil
 Would sing our poetic song

而今，我们在城市里打工
 像一块质朴的石头
 走出深山老林的寂寞
 被城里的机器打磨成五光十色
 其实，我们更像洁白的云朵
 轻轻地，轻轻地
 在城市的天空中飘过
 我们没有自己的住房
 没有固定的工作
 国家的风一吹
 我们便如秋天的落叶
 悄悄地，无奈地飘落

But today, we work in the city
 Like a plain stone
 That has left the silence of the old wood on
 [the mountain far away
 And has been ground into a dazzling gem by
 [the machines in the city
 Actually, we appear more like pure-white clouds
 Softly, softly
 We float in the sky of the city
 With no dwelling place of our own
 With no stable job
 The wind of state blows
 But we, like falling leaves in autumn,
 Have no choice but to quietly float down

The contrast between the merry bucolic picture in the first stanza and the delicately dull depiction of urban life in the second is striking. There are no poetic songs in the city, where migrants have passed from a communion with the crops to becoming lifeless gems, with only an artificial brightness, and the lack of dwelling places and stable jobs are very concrete markers of social disparity, stylistically emphasised with the abrupt break between the poem's first and second stanzas.

Speaking of the countryside, then, can be another way of speaking of the city. A constant comparison is built between “positive” traits of the first with “negative” ones of the latter, an urban present where the body is exhausted, life is weary and feelings are wounded. Rather than simply a melancholic remembrance of a vanished past and a lost childhood (of the authors, but also of China?),¹⁰ this nostalgia – in its inclination to see the country as a locus where one can stabilise one's identity, otherwise one is left “floating” – conceals (but also reveals) an indictment of the urban social system. The longing for the social security (and emotional attachments) of the rural home is understandable in a social context characterised by individualisation (Alpermann 2011), even stronger in subjects with a non-urban identity, most of whom

10 Whereas these depictions forge an easy connection with “nativist” or “soil” literature (乡土文学), they also relate to scar literature (伤痕文学, as noted by Liu 2012: 28) as well as, to some degree, to root-seeking literature (寻根文学). The limits of this paper force me to give just an ephemeral taste of this aspect.

have left their family behind and, because of *hukou*-determined outsider status, do not have access to urban social services and struggle to forge new ties amid the frenzy of their long working hours. This process then may provide a further signification of migrant authors' feeling of strangeness and displacement in the urban space, while also producing a fracture in the symbolic dominance of the urban-centric discourse.¹¹

This reminds us of Williams' observation, in his seminal study of the literary representation of the country and the city, that the old tends to reappear as something "against which contemporary change can be measured" (Williams 2016: 49), possibly activating "retrospect as aspiration" (ibid.: 59) when the social relations produced by this change are not satisfying. In the same vein, Hutcheon (2000: 195) further remarks that nostalgia and its aesthetics might "be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealised history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present".

Nostalgia, however, should be viewed critically and problematically. In particular, there is a risk of replicating a dichotomy that may fail to explain the pervasiveness of social relations in the current socio-economic system, and the essential function of the countryside as a reservoir of workforce for the city. Harvey (1989), in particular, warns against the fictional "aestheticization" of the (rural) locality. He admits that "the construction of such places, the fashioning of some localised aesthetic image, allows the construction of some limited and limiting sense of identity" (Harvey 1989: 303–304), but he also stresses that "the assertion of any place-bound identity has to rest at some point on the motivational power of tradition" (ibid.: 303), producing a sort of nationalist or ethnocentric critique of the present. In our case, such an "aestheticization" through (selective) memory and poetry conceals the existence of social relations in the countryside as unequal as those in the city; for, one might ask, what socio-economic necessity compelled rural people to become migrants, or floaters, in the first place?¹²

3.2. Urban alienation and labour precarity

Let us go now to the city proper. The representation of the metropolitan social space where migrants are condemned to a constant drifting amid precarious jobs is reinforced by four more verses later in Guo Fulai's poem, where another

11 Nostalgia, particularly through the figure of the mother, is identified as a trope of migrant-worker poetry by Qin Xiaoyu, who observes how "these poems of homesickness also feel illusory, as many of the 'hometowns' in the poems have not merely been embellished, but imply a kind of utopia". Such a utopia however "can only be reached by an impossible 'backward' movement, because the place only exists within the mother's body" (Qin Xiaoyu 2016: 30).

12 It is also true, however, that other works by Picun's authors create a much less idyllic picture of the countryside. Li Ruo herself, whose poetry has been analysed here, writes short stories highlighting issues determined precisely by the limiting social (and gender) relations of the village.

contrast is introduced, claiming for migrants the recognition of being the main contributors to the economic prosperity of China's urban upper class:

没有我们的青春奉献	Without the consecration of our youth
城市不会繁荣	The city would not be prospering
没有我们辛勤的工作	Without our energetic work
城里人过不上优裕的生活	The people in the city cannot live a life of abundance

This sense of alienation and social injustice is also present in other pieces of the collection, with a rich variety of styles and motifs. A very promising name of the literature group, Xiao Hai, features twice in the series. A young man hailing from Henan with a vast working experience in the factories of the country's south and north, Xiao Hai is an extremely versatile poet (and singer).¹³ In "Aria of the Begonia Clan" (海棠家族咏叹调), the poet's journey to Picun offers an opportunity to compare lower parts of the city, dirty and full of trash, to the shining "dream-like light glimmering from the skyscrapers in the distance" (远处的高楼里泛起梦幻般的光). In "City of Dreams" (梦想之都), the physical journey to Beijing railway station is juxtaposed to a more abstract trip "looking for the myself who first came to Beijing" (找找初次来到北京的自己), and the unequal access to the possibilities offered by the city is addressed in the form of unfulfilled dreams:

有些人的梦想坐在车里
 有些人的梦想飞在天上
 有些人的梦想在地宫里日夜疾驰
 而有些人的梦想破碎如尘埃洒落一地
 那梦想遥远如天上的星星
 被迷雾遮住在夜空 在时间的黑洞 在梦想之都 在梦想之都

Someone's dreams travel on trains
 Someone's dreams fly to the skies
 Someone's dreams gallop through night
 [and day in underground palaces
 But someone else's dreams are shattered
 [like dust spilled on the ground
 Those dreams, distant like stars in the sky,
 Covered by the fog in the night
 in the black holes of time
 in the city of dreams
 in the city of dreams

13 Xiao Hai is the pen name of Hu Liushi, in a tribute to Haizi, an appreciated poet of the 1980s, who committed suicide in 1989 and has been celebrated as a hero of poetry ever since (Xiao Hai literally means "little Hai"). References to Haizi abound in Xiao Hai's poetry, alongside other Western authors. Xiao Hai's first individual collection, *Howl of the Factory* (工厂的嚎叫), is explicitly named after Allen Ginsberg's famous poem "Howl", and contains some re-adaptations of Bob Dylan's songs. As observed by van Crevel (2019a: 141), he is being acknowledged and appreciated also beyond Picun, and his poetic versatility clearly plays a significant role in making this possible.

On a similar note, in “Worshipping Gods and Buddhas” (求神拜佛), Xu Lian-gyuan denounces the greed of the “Buddhas of money” (发财佛们) who “do not know the sufferings of mortals” (他们不知人间疾苦), with the former possibly identifiable as the *nouveau riche* of the city who are topologically located in the luxurious villas on the hills surrounding Beijing (and with an obvious hint at the commodification of religion). In the same pattern falls “Female Housekeeper” (家政女工), the piece written by Fan Yusu and entirely dedicated to the paradoxical and painful contradiction of having to lull a city tycoon’s baby to sleep while longing for her own. She has her employer’s baby in her arms, but all she thinks of is her left-behind daughters at home, whom she describes as “orphans with a mother” (有妈的孤儿).¹⁴

The city, then, appears to outsiders as inevitably associated with menial and oppressive jobs, family separation and unequal living conditions. Inequality is indeed a main theme and common thread connecting more or less all of the featured poems. One of the most powerful pieces is “Seventeen-year-old Shoulders” (十七岁的肩膀) by Wan Huashan, another young and prolific writer of the group, who moved to Beijing after going from job to job in factories, services, distribution and other occupations in the southern Pearl River Delta. The poem tells the tale of a migrant who starts working in the city at the age of seventeen, recounting the hardships he endures and sees other enduring. Youth, again, is a central element here, of which Wan laments the abrupt rupture, as “the rumbling noise [of the factory] / is the music of my seventeen years / and has clamoured down my beautiful dreams” (隆隆的噪声 / 就是十七岁的乐响 / 聒碎了美梦). In the following verses, he nimbly plays with a concept that in other poems appeared to carry a positive connotation, i.e. youth/childhood, to reverse it and make it another device of labour exploitation, that tramples even on the sense of aesthetic beauty that he is actually using now, to express his subjectivity:

一天的劳累
让我回复了儿时的酣睡
舅舅只有用手拧 用脚踢
才能把我拉回这千里之遥
的孤独异乡
曾经的梦幻 那些年少的激狂
那爱美的文艺的异想
都在这山脚下的轰鸣里埋葬

The fatigue of one workday
Allowed me to restore the deep sleeps of my childhood
Only pinching and kicking me can Uncle
Finally drag me back one thousand li away
In this lonely strange land
Past dreams, that wildness of youth
Those strange thoughts of love for literature and art
Are all buried under the rumble at the foot of this mountain

14 While Fan Yusu’s poems – and also Li Ruo’s “Forgive Me, Child” (对不起, 宝贝) – are written from the perspective of the migrant woman in the city, Zhang Yongxia’s “Buildings. You” (楼·你), is the lament of a left-behind child: “I don’t want high buildings or fancy houses / But just keeping you with me” (不要高楼, 不要洋房 / 只要把你挽留), but “You have turned around and left me / To go to / That city so far away” (转身离开了我 / 去那 / 很远很远的城市).

This piece (while also evoking again the ideas of a dream-like lost childhood) calls to mind the “rational fatalism” that Pozzana has identified as a trait of much of migrant-worker poetry, consisting in a rational admission of suffering which does not produce any social demands, but also warning against the fact that “while insight is a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of subjective existence, it is not enough to prevent self-destruction”, since “as soon as one gives in the poetic urge to lament one’s own sufferings, one risks succumbing to the ‘hope’ of recognition from the society which they ostensibly reject” (Pozzana 2019: 194). Wan’s poem can definitely be described as “rational-fatalist” verses to an even more extreme point, also in lamenting how “Towards life I do not have much hope” (我对生活没有太多的期许), while his “shoulders, scraped by life / hiss in ache” (被生活磨破的肩膀 / 吱吱地疼痛). This is further reinforced by the strong interdependence of migrants’ individual existence and labour exploitation, expressed on the imaginary level with frequent appearances of iron machines and physical fatigue, and on the linguistic level with the widespread use of verbs related to manual labour, or to the grinding and trampling down of individuality. These images variously meditate on the contemporary reproductions of wage slavery and labour alienation, made possible by migrants’ position at the low end of the social hierarchy of the urban space – the “strange land” in Wan’s verses.

This relates to yet another trope of migrant-worker poetry, i.e. the metamorphosis of the worker into the factory itself, his or her becoming just one more part of the assembly line.¹⁵ Guo Fulai, however, goes in the opposite direction. In his “My Poems Are Written in the Factory” (我的诗篇写在工厂) he does not resign himself to a dependence on the factory; rather he actively tries to transform it through his verses, refusing to accept that the industrial machine may grind him down. He uses his poem to impress his own subjectivity on the machine; it is still a form of metamorphosis, but in this case the poet (i.e. the worker) is the one performing the active role. After a first part composed of eighteen verses, written with a vivid and delightful lyric, where elements of the language themselves are inscribed in the “text” of the countryside (where crops, grass and plants form nouns, verbs and adjectives), Guo reverses the operation with the factory, in what appears to be an attempt to reappropriate a space where migrant workers are typically penalised by existing power relations:

15 As a matter of fact, this was already experimented with by Shu Ting in her 1980 poem “Assembly Line” (流水线), which, despite relying on a less immediate network of images and symbols, is still able to depict “the erasure of individuality in an unnatural, dehumanizing environment of mechanized mass production” (Yeh 2003: 521).

现在啊
 我的诗篇写在工厂
 一堆堆僵卧的铁管、方钢
 沉睡在车间、库房
 它们了无生气，浑浑噩噩
 像俗人一样困惑、迷茫
 经过我的焊接、打磨
 突然间
 变得像鲜花般漂亮
 不，更像优美的
 诗句一样
 让人耐不住地欣赏
 那眼光如同欣赏
 美丽的新娘

And now, oh,
 I write my poems in the factory
 Stacks of iron pipes and steel slabs, stiff and still,
 Sleep in the workshops and warehouses
 They are lifeless and confused
 And bewildered and at a loss just like ordinary persons
 While I weld and clean them up
 All of a sudden
 They become beautiful as flowers
 No, they are more like elegant
 Verses of poetry
 And they let people stand forever in admiration
 As if their eyes were contemplating
 A beautiful bride

A similar rhetorical operation takes place in “My Youth” (我的青春) by An Zhesi (who stands out in terms of background as a teacher in a school for migrant children). In this case, the metamorphic juxtaposition of the migrant’s individuality and social being is actuated through a series of predicates where the poet’s youth is compared to the various signs of his urban experience. The forty-four verses of the poem are grouped in couplets, whose first verse starts with “My youth is” (我的青春是), and follows with an object, further elaborated in the second verse. These objects variously relate to mobility, like the long-way train ticket, documents to access the city, the author’s social condition, daily life, youth and sexual life, and, towards the end, existential condition. His youth is a “part of the assembly line” (流水线上一个零件), the “arm of a tower crane” (塔吊上的长臂), a “tunnel 800 metres underground” (地下800米的巷道), “concrete+reinforcing steel” (混凝土+钢筋), variously alluding to jobs in the construction industry and not only, but also, among other things, a broken bed in the urban village where he lives (一张破床), again stressing undesirable living conditions, or a bottle of rice liquor (一瓶“牛二”) reminding him of his hometown. As we can see, the tone generally follows the pattern disclosed above; what is original about the poem are the references it contains:

我的青春是用孙志刚鲜血染红的
 那张生命攸关的“暂住证”
 我的青春是许立志诗歌里
 咽下的“那枚铁做的月亮”

My youth is reddened by the blood of Sun Zhigang
 A “temporary residence permit” without which
 [it is impossible to live
 My youth is the “iron moon”
 Swallowed in Xu Lizhi’s poem

The reference to Sun Zhigang relates to a case that provoked widespread indignation in China: a young migrant labourer originally from the northern Hubei province moved to Shenzhen and later to Guangzhou to work. As is common for migrant workers, he maintained his home *hukou*. He died on

30 March 2003 under unclear circumstances after being detained by the police for failing to produce his temporary residence permit. He was 27. The tragedy produced a huge uproar in public opinion, and led to the swift abolition of the “custody and repatriation” system (收容遣送) in August that year.¹⁶ Equally dramatic is Xu Lizhi’s story: a worker at Shenzhen’s Foxconn, he used his verses to denounce the harsh labour exploitation and despotic system in force at the infamous factory, before eventually committing suicide on 30 September 2014 at age 24.¹⁷ The “iron moon” mentioned in the poem, after which the largest English translation of migrant workers’ poems is also named (see Qin 2016), was an image used by Xu Lizhi in one of his poems, re-published posthumously in the collection *A New Day* (新的一天). What is relevant is how the poet uses this reference to the tragic injustices of the *hukou* system and to a poetic tradition stemming from oppressive labour conditions to produce a declaration of belonging both to a social group, with its position in the ramification of the city’s social space, and to its artistic forms of subjective expression, turned collective. Still a metamorphosis (“my youth is...”), but this time into a collective body. It is, I would argue, a proclamation of identity of, or identification with, a collective body that is perceived and also perceives itself as the Other to the metropolis.

3.3. Symbolic power struggle

Although their position in the web of social relations of the urban space appears as unanimously characterised by undeniable inequality, Picun poets do not utter any explicit cry for social change. Li Wenli, however, has a different tone in the final part of her first poem “We Are a Group of Female Domestic Workers” (我们是一群家政工女). Throughout the piece, she repeatedly demands for female domestic workers the dignity that should be rightfully granted to such hardworking labourers (examples of their hardships recur across the verses), who came to Beijing full of hope for a city they were long taught to fantasise and dream about, only to be relegated to its social and geographical periphery: “We, hearts beating in excitement, entered the Beijing we had seen in the news on TV / [...] But in the eyes of the capital Beijing, we / Are so insignificant, like a speck of dust” (我们心跳不安的走进电视新闻中看到的北京 / [...] 可我们在首都北京的眼里 / 却那么渺小, 像一粒尘土一样). Instead of contenting herself with a newfound relief in the space of poetry, of recasting a comforting or nostalgic image of the rural home, or of critiquing urban inequality with berating verses, Li strongly asserts that female domestic workers embody all the characteristics of the good (urban) citizen thought to be uncharacteristic

16 Sun’s story features prominently in Picun’s worker culture museum, as part of a section dedicated to the “important events” (重要事件) of the history of Chinese migrant workers.

17 See Pun et al. 2015 for an account of the Foxconn labour regime, and van Crevel 2019b for an analysis of Xu’s poetry.

of migrants (Dutton 1998): they are “sincere and honest” (朴实善良), “cultured” (有文化), as they were “good students” in their earlier years (曾是学校里的优秀学生), and with good personal qualities (不要说我们没素质), whose only sin is to “be born under an unlucky star” (生不逢时). Then she writes towards the end:

我们靠自己勤劳的双手	We, counting on our hardworking hands,
想让亲爱的家人过得更好一点	Wish to give our dear ones a better life
我们苦在心里笑在脸上	With pain in our heart, a smile on our faces,
只为追求更美好的生活	We just seek after a life more beautiful

These verses call for further analysis. What is easy to spot here is, undoubtedly, the influence of the symbolic capital of the Chinese state, as 美好生活 (“better life” in the official English translation, see Xi 2017: 29–30) is an integral part of the official discourse, especially after the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017. For sure, Li is presenting migrant women as perfectly capable of conforming to the dominant form of good urban citizenship (as shaped in its characters and values), and in doing so, she emphasises migrant women’s role as part of the national community: “We are children of the motherland too” (我们也是祖国的孩子啊), where the adverb “too” (也) linguistically underlines a proud demand for recognition and admission (“We [...] thirst for understanding and respect”, 我们[...]渴望理解和尊重), and the motherland is conjured up as an idealised unitary concept beyond country/city (and class) divisions. On the other hand, however, this may also be read as an active effort to exploit existing symbolic power relations to her own advantage, to claim migrants’ right to the city and demand society’s recognition through self-admission into the hegemonic discourse. “Beijing, we have made your homes our home” (北京, 我们把你的家当做自己的家), she further writes, playing on the ambivalence of “home” as the migrant women’s dwelling place, and the houses where they work.

Resorting again to Bourdieusian categories, the risk in this attempt to acquire a larger amount of symbolic capital would be to perpetuate, rather paradoxically, a doxic relation to the social world that leads to “the acceptance of established divisions [...] through the affirmation of a higher unity (national, familial, etc.)” (Bourdieu 1991: 130). In particular, the dramatic “evictions” of winter 2017–18, which led to the expulsion from Beijing (and other cities as well) of a large number of migrants, labelled the “low-end population” (低端人口),¹⁸ citing safety reasons, may have created a new, potentially more complicated situation.

18 Some of the literature group’s members, led by Xiao Hai, performed a “flash mob” just after the evictions started in November 2017, holding a public reading of Yu Xiuhua’s poem “Go, Child, With Beijing’s Northern Wind” (走吧孩子趁着北京的北风) in support of the “low-end population”. The clip recording the action can be seen at YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qqx3fGsXcYU> (accessed 30 September 2019).

4. Concluding remarks

Meng Lang, a renowned Chinese poet who passed in December 2018, believed, although from a different poetic dimension, that “the poet inhabits the blind spots of history” (Meng Lang 1997: 131–132). Pozzana remarks that “these places are perfectly inhabited by the new migrant poets”, as “today the worker toils away in the dark shadow of history” (Pozzana 2019: 190). We can further paraphrase Meng’s statement and affirm that migrant-worker authors write from the darkest spots of urban modernity, prompting us to meditate on their artistic production in a way that fully grasps its multiple layers, especially as a “translation” of the city into (poetic) language and as directly, or indirectly, addressing poignant issues related to the access and the right to the city.

The “retrospect as aspiration” in the dreamful return to an individual’s pre-urban, rural life and its association with a happy childhood – interrupted by an urban present that tramples youth down with its harsh reality of labour exploitation, the impossibility of living in the city outside of a marked social condition of “outsiders” (“so insignificant, like a speck of dust”) that makes Beijing appear more like a “strange land” than a “city of dreams” in the eyes of those who suffer social misrecognition – and the persistent although unfulfilled desire to “make [Beijing’s] homes our homes” variously conjure up the idea of an urban experience strongly determined by a social identity which is neither fully urban nor fully rural, even when it wants to be either one or the other. Generally, the city appears as an “Other”, either in opposition to a more or less idealised rural home with which there is a stronger relation of identification, or in its inaccessibility to individuals positioned at the lower end of relations in its social space. The city’s dark, invisible and overlooked spots can be socially, when not physically, very remote from the “dream-like light glimmering from the skyscrapers in the distance”.

Furthermore, in serving as a form of textual self-representation for the subaltern domestic migrant subject in globalised Beijing, and in inscribing the subaltern migrant’s body in the urban order’s text, this poetry contributes to the transformation of the text itself, through a different urban narration provided by the “invisible” subaltern. In addition to depicting migrants’ living conditions, the rural-urban divide and sense of rootlessness, it also challenges urban identity, or how it transforms after the impact with mobility, and the objective limits of individual agency in this social web. In particular, with the dialectical relation between country and city mainly expressed through the sense of rootlessness present in much of their poems, the authors under scrutiny remind us of the contemporary opacity of the city-country divide, even when they appear to imagine a lost bucolic utopia. With this I do not mean to negate the concrete existence of this divide, which is absolutely evident in the

striking material inequality between China's urban and rural areas (and between different-tier cities as well). My point is that these two dimensions are strongly connected by a tight socio-economic network. Not only is the countryside a reservoir of labour-force for the industrialised city, but the city itself is also permanently changed by the inflow of these "rural strangers" in its text. The fact that some of these migrant poets, at some point, might step out of their marginality and be acknowledged as members of the "official" cultural system (following the footsteps of other migrant writers, most prominently novelist Wang Shiyue and poet Zheng Xiaoqiong), further reinforces the concept.¹⁹ This should provocatively challenge our conception of what it means to be "urban" or even "local" today, in China just like elsewhere, as well as the rationale behind the bureaucratic systems of exclusion still in force.

Migrant-worker poetry then needs to be fully considered in its double significance both as a form of literary expression and as social discourse. In dealing with the urban experience of its authors, it not only artistically represents this experience in the form of verses, but it also continuously poses the question of who can speak (for) the city. With this dialectical articulation of the politics and poetics of the urban space, Picun's literature group gives its own contribution to furthering that complexity of questions, both about its overall context and poethood itself, that, as stressed by van Crevel (2019a, 2019b), we are just beginning to realise in its fullness.

19 Li Yunlei, however, probably also influenced by the Maoist tradition (pre-Maoist too, to be fair) of the artist's integration with the common people, emphasises the risk for professionalised migrant writers of losing contact with their social base (Li Yunlei 2014: 185).

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