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Zheng Xiaoqiong's Representation of Female Chinese Migrant Workers and Their Views on Marriage

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1. Introduction

“[The media] would just choose one or two individuals who were connected to the aspect of work injuries, they used these individuals to represent the situation of the migrant worker in regard to the issue of work injuries, they would choose the object which they would need and those parts of it that fit their needs, and everything else there was to say about that female worker would be left out.”

[...] 他们就会选择一个或者两个有关于工伤方面的个体，用个体呈现农民工在工伤方面的境况，他们选择他们需要的对象，以及适合他们需要的部分，而这个女工其他方面被省略掉了。(Zheng 2012, p. 252, my translation)

This is a quote from the anthology *Female Workers: A Record* 女工记 by the Chinese poet Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 (*1980) which was published in 2012. The cited passage gives a hint about the poet's motivation to write about and publicize the female workers' experiences: it is important to her to represent the women in her poetry as complex, multi-faceted individuals. She believes that individuals should not be reduced to single aspects of their experience that would serve the storylines of media reports. To her, the media would tend to generalize and objectify the experience of the workers. The anthology contains poems and prose, in which Zheng Xiaoqiong captures over 100 of her fellow female migrant workers 女工.

The female workers in the anthology are women from the lower strata of Chinese society. In her poetry she addresses issues such as overtime shifts, miserable working conditions, the bodily and emotional pain and dehumanization of individuals through the mechanism of the labor market. She writes about the women's ideas and hopes, their failure and fears. Besides focusing on the women's work experience, she also writes about their roles as daughters, wives and mothers and the demands that society has on these women.

1.1 Research question

I will examine the following research question:

- How does Zheng Xiaoqiong narrate the experience of the female migrant worker and their views on marriage in her anthology *Female Workers: A Record*?

Writing this thesis, I decided to use the term female migrant workers to describe the group of individuals which are portrayed in Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry. Other terms which are often used when writing about the Chinese precariat are new industrial workers 新产业工人 (Yu 2018, 36), China's new workers 中国新工人 (ibid.), the unfinished proletariat (Pun 2010), "working for the boss" workers 打工仔 and working sisters 打工妹 (Dooling 2017). Since the reforming processes of the Chinese economy, which started at the end of the 1970s, millions of people moved from the Chinese countryside to urban centers in search for better job opportunities.¹ Due to the structural difference between the countryside and the city and the maintaining of dual *hukou*-system 户口, these workers had only limited opportunities on the job market: Most of them work in the minimum wage sector, on construction sites, in factories and in the service industry. Being registered under a rural *hukou* means limited access to social welfare privileges in the city. Furthermore, migrant workers enjoy only limited legal assistance with regard to the workers' protection. Nowadays, many of them live in the second or third generation in the cities. However, their legal status remains the same, which makes it difficult for them to overcome material inequality. To stress these structural differences, I decided to use the term female migrant workers instead of using female workers which would be the literal translation of 女工.

I decided to focus on marriage because of its prominent presence as a topic in *Female Workers*. I focus on the aspect of marriage, as this aspect forms an important part of the women's lives. In China, as in other parts of the world, marriage symbolizes maturity: The woman becomes a full member of society who takes up her responsibilities as a wife. Thereby, most women are expected to marry into the family of the husband and leave their own families

¹ According to Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, 287 million migrant workers made up more than one third of the Chinese working population in 2017.

http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201804/t20180427_1596389.html (last access: 09/09/2019)

to not become a financial burden (Beynon 2004). To many rural women, marriage means more social and financial security. Remaining unmarried would make it hard and difficult to have a home and a “viable economic future” (Beynon 2004, 136).

I decided to focus on Zheng Xiaoqiong’s work, because female authors that explore female experience are still underrepresented in discussions of contemporary Chinese literature. Authors such as Shen Yichin (1992) argue that from a male perspective female characters and female experience are distorted and tend to be idealized in traditional patterns of gender.

Furthermore, literary fields today are dominated by male gatekeepers, as Heather Inwood calls them (Inwood 2014, 7). Those gatekeepers – editors, publishers, journalists, critics, authors themselves, literature professors and other professionals – set the conventions for accessing cultural and artistic fields. This goes for the contemporary Chinese poetic landscape, as well, as Maghiel van Crevel points out (van Crevel 2017b). The structures of literary fields have an impact on writing by women and female poetry would often be presented as a subgroup of wider genres such as avant-garde poetry.

The representation of female workers’ experience is not only influenced by an underrepresentation of female experience in literature but also by an underrepresentation of the new precariat. Author like Sun Wanning (2018) and Zhou Xun (2008) point out that in the last few decades, starting in the 1990s and especially in the new century, the representation of citizenship in China has shifted from the propagation of a worker-peasant alliance to urban middle-class consumption and lifestyle habits. In this situation the representation of workers is marginalized in cultural production, certainly if compared to the Mao era.

Stressing these two points, it is not my aim to essentialize womanhood or more specifically womanhood in the precariat but to add a discussion on female representation to the already existing cultural and literary narratives.

1.2 Theoretical orientation and methodology

In the first part of my work, in chapter 2, I will explain what influences the representation of female workers and ideal wifehood in Chinese media and society.

In the second part of this work, in chapter 3, I will analyze selected poems from her anthology *Female Workers*. This part contains my translations of her poems, as there are

currently no English translations available of this anthology.² Analyzing her work, I searched for words which are related to marriage, such as “to marry” 結婚, “wedding” 婚礼, “arranged dating” 相亲, “to get divorced” 离婚, “husband” 丈夫, “wife” 妻子, “unmarried” 未婚. The importance of wifehood and marriage for the poetic protagonists finds expression in the overwhelming appearance of marriage-related words in the poems: Almost every poem contains lines linked to marriage or wedding 婚, which appears a total of 164 times, often in words like “to marry” 结婚 or “wedding” 婚礼. Of course, I realize that this may align with Zheng's special interest in this topic.

I labeled the poems with different tags regarding things like age, family relations, marital status, socio-economic background, gender relations and relations to the author. This process of tagging made it easier for me to find topics and matters which appeared in several different poems and therefore stand out.

I assume that *Female Workers* could be read as signaling agency, in the sense that it adds new representations about marriage and the female experience to mainstream narratives. While media narratives tend to represent social realities of the female workers from a one-dimensional perspective, Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry raises the questions of what those social realities actually mean for the individual and how they affect the individuals.

For the third part of my work, in chapter 4, I examine how Zheng Xiaoqiong is positioned in the context of Chinese literature and how she positions herself within this context. For this examination, I refer to interviews, essays and secondary literature on her persona and work, as well as personal communication via emails from November 2018 onwards. In June 2019, I had the opportunity to meet her in person and talk to her during the Rotterdam Poetry International Festival.

I show how her personal agency and interaction with Chinese literary institutions influenced and continues to influence her social stance. I particularly focus on discussion around the generic *dagong* poetry 打工诗歌. Generally speaking, *dagong* poetry addresses the experience of migrant workers at the assembly line in factories and in the industrial zones in China. Common topics of *dagong* poetry are homesickness and displacement, spiritual and bodily suffering, the hardships of the individuals who find themselves in the factory environment and the mechanisms of the global capitalist market. To Heather Inwood (2011) *dagong* poetry can be read as a form of “grass-root” culture. She discusses its connection to

² I hope that my translation of her work conveys the essence of how I understood and read Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry and does her justice.

political engagement and leftist literature, especially the debate of aesthetic value versus moral impact. In chapter 4, I particularly concentrate on how Zheng Xiaoqiong is read within the context of aesthetic value and moral impact. Furthermore, I add the notion of gender: I analyze how Zheng Xiaoqiong positions herself in the context of female authorship.

1.2.1 The representation of experience

Because I write about the experience of female workers in China and how this experience is represented in Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry, I find it necessary to explain what I mean by experience and how the communication of experience could be understood as a form of agency. Furthermore, I shortly discuss, how poetry could be understood as a communication form of real-life experience.

When I talk about experience in this work, I mean the engagement of an individual with the world which surrounds them, which is influenced by the individual's perception and interpretation about the world. To Michael Pickering (2008), experience and the representation of experience involve interpretation and therefore cannot be understood as "pure and transparent" (Pickering 2008, 19). Therefore, there exists a tension between "knowing" and "experiencing". This tension makes it difficult to read representations of experience as evidence for social, political or cultural relations in the world; but it does not automatically invalidate a vision of *Female Workers* as reflecting, to a substantial degree, the realities of worker life in contemporary China.

Authors like Joan Scott (1991) argue that the experience of an individual or a group of people should not be put against or in favor of a consisting ideological framework. Experience would then serve as evidence "for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world" (Scott 1991, 777). Influenced by a Foucauldian concept of power, to Scott, experience is politically constructed and influenced by discourses which position the subject in society. Instead of questioning the origins under which individuals make their experiences, the representation of experience would be taken for granted. To essentialize the experience of a group or individual would serve as the foundation for differentiating, which means to "other" individuals and groups outside one's own group. The representation of experience would then be taken to explain the "true" or "natural" characteristics of the individuals and groups from the "other" class, gender or ethnicity.

Other authors agree with Scott's critique on essentializing experience, however, they point out that the communication of experience could work as a powerful strategy to challenge existing discourses and narratives in society. Johanna Oksala explains that feminists expressed their own experience in cultural work to confront the "one-dimensional" perspectives on womanhood within society (Oksala 2014, 399). Michael Pickering calls the use of experience as a political tool called "strategic essentialism" (Pickering 2008, 22): voices within a society are taken to questioning stereotypical images. While one should be aware of the pitfalls, essentializing the subaltern experience happens because one understands the mechanisms of an unequal power relation in how narratives and discourses are formed. The narration of experience could be a tool in challenging existing mainstream narratives and gender inequalities and a way of cultural democratization (Michael Pickering 2008).

In this way, the communication of experience can be a form of agency. In this work, I understand agency as the "sociocultural capacity to act" (Ahern 2001, 130). Agency happens within the discursive relations in the world, it effects and reconstitutes those discursive relations. Reading Zheng Xiaoqiong's *Female Workers*, I argue that her work is a form of agency because she communicates the experience of female migrant workers different to existing mainstream narratives.

1.2.2 Poetry as a communication form of real-life experience

My presumptions about experience raise the urgent question if poetry could be understood as a solid form of communicating or representing real-life experience.

Poetry is the creative work of the poet, it is imagined and dives into spheres which often seem to be far away from worldliness. Thereby, the engagement with language, form and aesthetics could be understood as significant features of poetry as an art form.

In addition, poetry could be understood as an interaction with the world. Heather Inwood (2011) outlined the discussions about how poetry in China reflects on social realities and how the poets' personal experience to contemporary issues are expressed in poetic work. She points out that these discussions about poetry and its relation to social realities tended to put aesthetics and the poetic imagination into background (Inwood 2011, 51f.). Thereby, I do not necessarily think that poetry needs to reflect on social realities and be a form of comment or critique. However, in the case of *Female Workers*, I read the poems as a form of interaction and response on the social realities of the female workers, mainly because Zheng Xiaoqiong draws the lines to reality herself in the afterword, as well as in interviews where she talks about her work on

the anthology.³ Saying this, it is not my aim to put aesthetic and poetic language behind or under aspects of social value. I think that it would not do justice to creative work to think in such hierarchies.

1.3 Literature review

This thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of academic literature on female workers and their representation in media and culture. I draw on the works of different academic departments such as cultural studies, anthropology, social science, literature studies and area studies.

In her ethnographic study on female workers in China, Tamara Jacka (2005) explains how discourses on rural and urban China developed before, through and after the socialist era of China. She examines how these discourses influenced the picture of female workers from the countryside in the media and in society. In another article (2006) she examines the language with which Chinese women's organization approached the connection between women and rural development. Different to Jacka, who's fieldwork was mainly based in Beijing, Pun Ngai (2005) illuminates the situation of female workers in Shenzhen. The main source of her work is an eight-months fieldwork, where she worked and lived alongside other women in a factory in Shenzhen. Sun Wanning (2012a, 2014b, 2018a, 2018b) is another scholar who examines the medial and cultural representation of female workers in China. In her studies she shows how the Chinese media favors certain narratives on the worker, while other notions are left out. Justyna Jaguścik (2011) argues that even though female rural workers would be represented as individuals by official and commercial media, this representation should be understood as a form of appeasement: the representation of the individual, their success and failure in media would follow the "flexible logic of capitalism" (Jaguścik 2011, 136). In other words, the representation of the individual would show that it is possible to be successful and happy in a modern Chinese society if you just become the best form of yourself, raise your "quality" (素质) and keep your head down. These representations would exclude outer conditions of why it might not be possible for the individual to fit into given role models.

³ Two of these interviews can be found on the homepage of the China Writers Association: <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2013/2013-05-20/162725.html> (last access: 11/09/2019) and on the homepage of *Phoenix News* 凤凰网资讯: http://news.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2012_02/19/12613261_0.shtml (last access: 11/09/2019).

Understanding the meaning of marriage in China I concentrate on the work by Michael Palmer (1995), Deborah Davis (2014), Harriet Evans (2002) and Lucetta Yip Lo Kam (2015). Michael Palmer and Deborah Davis explain how social and political developments formed and changed the Chinese marriage law and marriage as a political institution from the 1950s to early 2000 onwards. In connection to gender and womanhood the representation of wifehood and was discussed by Harriet Evans. She mostly focused on images of ideal wifehood from the 1950s to the 1980s and reconstructs how the image of the ideal wife transformed in connection to social and political changes. Lucetta Yip Lo Kam explains how alternative concepts of partnership entered Chinese society from the 1979 onwards, however heterosexual marriage remained the norm. In a discursive anticipation, heterosexual marriage and other forms of social relationships are often divided in “normal” 正常 and “abnormal” 不正常 relationships (Kam 2015).

A big part of Zheng Xiaoqiong’s oeuvre, including *Female Workers*, was discussed in the context of *dagong* poetry. Sun Wanning (2012b) focused on *dagong* literature in several articles. She disassembles the discussions and debates about *dagong* poetry by cultural elites and worker-poets and shows how these debates relate to discussions on class formation and class dissipation. In his work, Maghiel van Crevel (2017a) explores the relations between *dagong* poetry, which he calls “battlers poetry”, and avant garde poetry. In this work he reflects on the biographical background of the three poets Xie Xiangnan, Zheng Xiaoqiong and Xu Lizhi and analyzes different *dagong* anthologies, opinions of literary critics. In this way, he shows how *dagong* poetry interacts with avant garde poetry through the cultural translation of its writers, supporters and critics, in China as well as in an international context. In a review essay (2017c), he reflects on the anthology *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Worker Poetry* (2016) which was edited by the poet and critic Qin Xiaoyu and translated by Eleanor Goodman. In a eponymous film titled *Iron Moon* (2016), the directors Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue portrait five *dagong* poets. Eleanor Goodman (2017) herself raises the question of who decides whose voices are getting heard and reflects on her role as a translator in these processes.

Other authors emphasize notions of gender and class when discussing *dagong* poetry, particularly by Zheng Xiaoqiong. Gong Haomin (2018) draws a line between leftist eco-criticism and Zheng Xiaoqiong’s work. Zhou Xiaojing (2015) examines the poet’s agency for labor and environmental justice. In another paper (2014a) Sun Wanning argues that new *dagong* literature of female writers contests the dual narratives on female sexuality in Chinese society and media. Amy Dooling (2017) explores the spectra of the representation of rural female workers in media and cultural production. Her work includes the analysis of Zheng Xiaoqiong’s

work and the work of another writer with a similar background, Wang Lili 王丽丽. In her dissertation, Justyna Jaguścik (2016 [2014], 2018) explores the representation of the body in Chinese women's literary production. Her work includes the representation of the body in *dagong* poetry. In another essay (2018) she argues that the writing by female authors such as Zhai Yongming 翟永明, Zheng Xiaoqiong and others could be understood as the expression of ecofeminist writing, which explores the individual and its relation to the environmental problems of the 21st century.

1.4 Limitations and pitfalls

Because I approach *Female Workers: A Record* from a cultural studies perspective, there are some limitations and pitfalls which I would like to reflect on. In the past and present, the field of cultural studies was critiqued for lacking methodology and reducing academic discussions about art and culture to politics on identity and class (Inwood 2014, 5). Because academic work of cultural studies showed a political motivation, they were accused for being too positivistic, too faux-objective or schematic. Charles Hale and other poststructuralists counterargued that all kinds of knowledge production are produced within a political context (Hale 2008, 7). I agree with Heather Inwood that because knowledge production occupies an objective position, academics can and should interact with political engagement and pay attention to the presentation of existing knowledge as true and universal (Inwood 2014, 6). I agree with Lawrence Grossberg that a cultural studies approach could help to challenge and deconstruct universal truths and “holds on to a more modest conception of the possibility and authority of knowledge” (Grossberg 2010, 9). I chose to work on *Female Workers: A Record* because it channels the voices and experiences of people who often disappear in media and social narratives because of their economically, socially and politically disadvantaged position.

Saying this, I do not aim to compare the single work of an author to general media narratives and then draw hard conclusions on the general experience of female workers in China. My aim is to show how poetic representations can provide alternative perspectives on the experience of female workers.

2 The female worker in media and society in China

2.1 The situation of the female workers

The following chapter is about the representation of female workers and wifehood in Chinese media and society. It shows how these representations are influenced by national narratives, gender inequalities and the structural differences between urban and rural China.

In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party propagated the equality between man and women. Tina Mai Chen (2003) explains that during the 1950s female workers were represented as worker models who worked hard to build up the nation. Those model workers 女杰第一, which can be translated to “outstanding females first”, were represented as the first women who entered male-dominated jobs. This influenced the representation of female bodies as strong and androgynous (ibid.).

However, the state propagated equality only when there was a lack of labor. During the 1970s when the economy struggled, women were the first who lost their jobs. (Davis 2002) It was only in 1993 that the state introduced the Law for the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests when it acknowledged the inequality between man and women and actively prohibited discrimination against women (Palmer 1995, 112).

Apart from gender inequality, there already existed a developmental difference between rural and urban China. In the 1950s, the Party propagated the alliance between workers and peasants. The Party propagated the elimination of the “three great differences” 三大差别, which were the inequalities between city and countryside, mental and manual labor, and workers and peasants (Jacka 2006a, 38). The workers and the peasants were propagated as heroes who drove the revolution. Under Mao, especially the peasants gained status and benefited from reforms in education and health care (ibid.).

However, the structural differences between villages and cities hardly changed. Because the government focused on heavy industrialization in the cities and agricultural production in the countryside, they needed to find mechanisms to balance labor and control people's place of residence. From the mid-1950s on the national government introduced policies to prevent the rural population from migrating to the cities. In 1958, the household registration system also known as *hukou*-system 户口 was introduced: All internal migration required permission of the local governments and Chinese citizens lost freedom to live where they wanted to. Henceforth, the Chinese population was divided into citizens with a rural *hukou* and citizens with an urban

hukou. This system was intended to prevent “undesirable” migration flows (Chan 2010, 357). The systematic division reinforced the structural differences between urban and rural people. While urban citizens mainly worked in the industrial sector and had privileges such as access to social welfare, the rural citizens were bottled up in the countryside. Only when laborers were needed in the state’s industrialization objectives, the restrictions were loosened.

Consequently, the rural and urban population did not come in contact with each other. There was little exchange between the countryside and the cities. And if there would be an exchange, it would amplify existing prejudices between city- and country-people. For example, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when many urbanites were sent to the countryside “to learn from the peasants”. These actions reinforced already existing prejudice of the rural people, as for example, proud, revolutionary or hard-working, but also stubborn, selfish or backward (Jacka 2006a, 39).

After the opening of the Chinese economy and the establishment of so-called special economic zones from 1979 onwards, the representation of the Chinese social status quo slowly changed. The promotion of the revolutionary bond between the peasants and the workers stepped into the background. Instead, there was the urge to become a modern, industrialized and developed China. Representations of modernity and development oriented on international cosmopolitanism as the urban middle-class citizen replaced the peasant-worker alliance in its consumptions-habits and lifestyle⁴ (Sun 2018, Zhou Xun 2008).

With the opening of the Chinese markets, the need for labor rose. In 1980s and 1990s a main strategy of the state was to fill unwanted positions with cheap labor from the countryside. People from the countryside were allowed to work in the cities, but only as workers with a temporary contract, and with temporary residence permits. They worked in the so-called 3-D jobs (“dangerous, dirty and demeaning”) and still had no access to social welfare or adequate legal support. Nevertheless, many millions of people with a rural *hukou* moved to the cities to earn more money. By the late 1990s migrating workers made 70 to 80 percent of the total labor force in Shenzhen and Dongguan, in the Pearl River Delta. (Chan 2010, 359) Tamara Jacka points out that the sheer amount of people who moved from the Chinese countryside to the cities made the structural differences between country and city visible (Jacka 2006a, 42f.). Pun

⁴ Zhou Xun (2008) marks that even though consumption was focused on an urban middle class with new technologies and foreign products, there hardly existed a Chinese middle class until the beginning 2000s. The middle class was rather an elite class with political cadres, engineers, businessmen and managers as the only people who could afford a cosmopolitan lifestyle (Zhou Xun 2008, 171f.).

Ngai argues that this new working class had nothing in common with the working class in a Maoist vision, was confined from the beginning by socio-political structures as well as by urban citizens who looked down upon the newcomers (Pun 2005, 30). People from the urban centers watched these newcomers with superstition; Tamara Jacka explains that words like “blind drifters” 盲流 and “floating population” 流动人口 described the migrating workers as a homogeneous social group (Jacka 2006, 43f.). These terms would express disapproval and mistrust towards people from different areas outside one’s own native place (ibid.).

The developmental differences between the countryside and the city were influenced by the national strive for modernity. In the 1980s and 1990s, the terminology around the aforementioned notion of “quality” *suzhi* 素质 played an important role in policy-making. It is not always clear if *suzhi* only meant personal qualities, intelligence or physical qualities: Often the term was and is used for all of these together to rate the position of an individual in society⁵ (Kipnis 2006, Anagnost 2004). Andrew Kipnis explains that *suzhi* is understood as the natural character traits which could be influenced by outer conditioning (Kipnis 2006, 297). To him, “*suzhi* has taken on sacred overtones. It now marks the hierarchical and moral distinction between the high and the low and its improvement is a mission of national importance” (ibid.).

From the 1980s the word *suzhi* appeared more often in the *People’s Daily*, the national newspaper that is the Party’s mouthpiece, where it was connected to birth control (“human population quality” 人口素质) and education (“education for quality” 素质教育) (ibid., 298). Political leaders tended to refer to their high *suzhi* to justify their position over other people, whereas people from the countryside were widely assumed to have low *suzhi* (Kipnis 2006, 295f.). During the 1980s and 1990s, articles emphasized the positive role of migrating workers for a national economy but also made the movements responsible for social problems like overpopulation, dirt and increasing crime rates in the cities (Jacka 2006a, 48). The state blamed the low *suzhi* of the rural population for the general backwardness of the nation and aimed to raise the *suzhi* of China’s rural population through birth control and educational control.

The drive to raise people’s *suzhi* was linked to the character developments of women. The Women’s Federation as well as non-governmental organizations encouraged women to improve their *suzhi* in several areas in order to raise their social position (Jacka 2006b). The Women’s Federation encouraged women to improve their “four haves” and their “four selfs”

⁵ Recently, the term is used for the classification of the Muslim population in Xinjiang. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/opinion/china-reeducation-mind-control-xinjiang.html> (last access: 08/09/2019)

which contained the following qualities: to have motivation, education, determination and aspirations (four haves), self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-strength (four selfs) (Jacka 2006b, 588).

Generally, it was argued that the low *suzhi* of rural women was the main cause for their pity. To Li Tao, organizer of the Migrant Women's Club, a woman's "low quality meant that they were unable to manage the obstacles thrown up by a society in transition. Consequently, raising migrant women's quality [*suzhi*] was the most important means by which to address their problems" (Jacka 2006b, 588f.). Official views and propagation stress the responsibility of the individual for their own problems, they completely leave out socio-structural and political conditions and do not stress the responsibility of government institutions and the state to change structural pitfalls.

These views are reflected in media narratives, as Sun Wanning shows in several articles (2004, 2012a). One of her examples is the story of Xiong Deming. Xiong Deming became famous when she spoke up to (at that time) prime minister Wen Jiabo. In 2003, Wen Jiabo was on an inspection tour to the rural areas of Chongqing. Even though local politicians advised the population to not speak personally to the prime minister, Xiong Deming took courage and spoke to Wen Jiabo about the horrible working situation of her husband. Her husband still waited for the salary of a job which he had done one year earlier. Wen Jiabo promised her to take care of the situation and only six hours after this confrontation Xiong Deming and her husband received the money. Because of this story Xiong Deming became a media sensation and gained celebrity status. Her story gave opportunity to show how the state is concerned with the social injustice of its citizens. After Xiong Deming's exchange with Wen Jiabo, local authorities launched rules and regulations to make sure that workers gained their wages. Sun Wanning explains that the Chinese official media likes to report about stories such as the one of Xiong Deming, because they serve as an example for self-strength and self-reliance of women in Chinese society: If you would just stick to your role in society and be a good citizen, you will get heard and eventually improve your position.

2.2 Ideal wifeness in Chinese media and society

Xiong Deming's story became popular because Xiong was represented as a modern "virtuous wife (and good mother)" 贤妻良母 (Evans 2002, Jiang 2007). This ideal found its origin in Republican times (1911-1949): women were summoned to put their service of the national state as educated and socially responsive wives and mothers (Jiang 2007). This idea of the well-educated and socially engaged woman reappeared in discourses on communist women.

In the official political course, the new wife was represented as the revolutionary counterpart to her husband. Wives were encouraged to improve their education and take part in political activities at the side of their husbands. The husband had no right to make the wife his personal servant but should encourage her to actively take part in communal life (Evans 2002, 337). However, they should not be too educated to eventually one-up their husbands in education or skills. The main duty of a "model wife" remained to be responsive for her husband's needs, be loyal and supportive and "[serve] her husband in the name of public good" (ibid., 338). The propagated equality of man and woman was measured in two different standards. Women were encouraged to strive for a masculine ideal, but they were not discharged from their domestic obligations: housekeeping and child care remained female tasks which duplicated the responsibilities of wives (Evans 2002). In this way, the party propagated the idea of the "revolutionary wife" which served the common good of the nation without breaking with traditional gender roles, basically loading women with a double burden.

Before the establishment of the marriage law in the 1950s, marriage was mainly understood as a form of kinship which was a family matter. The new marriage law of 1950 was a political novelty to equal husband and wife and broke up the patriarchal structures of households. It officially abolished child betrothals and concubinage, abandoned forced marriage and restricted the remarriage of widows and allowed divorce for the first time, when both parties want to divorce, or mediation did not work (Davis 2014, 42).

Nevertheless, it had its limits: it only favored the marriage between a monogamous, heterosexual couple in which the legal marriage age of women was lower than that of men; it used vague language when it came to demands of unilateral divorce and gave local magistrates the power to decide over the individual divorce cases, especially when it concerned "collective 'needs of production'" (Davis 2014, 43). Divorce remained hard to obtain and by the late 1970s only the most precarious marriage-cases were dissolved by divorce (Palmer 1995).

The transformation of the market had an impact on the private life. Harriet Evans (2002) points out that with the privatization of labor there used to happen a "privatization" of love and

marriage (Evans 2002, 336). Many communes and worker units were dissolved, and marriage became a concern of private matters. The marriage law was renewed in 1980 and gave more autonomy to the individual. The new law added the breakdown of affection as a possible divorce reason and distinguished between the spouse who was at fault and the spouse who was innocent (Davis 2014, 46; Palmer 1995, 123).

Furthermore, new alternative concepts and ideas about love and marriage gradually entered the society, such as singlehood, same-sex relationships, polyamory or extramarital relationship. However, Lucetta Yip Lo Kam points out that these alternative concepts entered society relatively free from state interactions and concerns (Kam 2015, 79). For the state, heterosexual, monogamous marriage remained the norm, which was favored and propagated by legal and medical experts, as well as official women's and youth groups (Kam 2015, Evans 1997, Jacka 2006b). Kam points out that the terms "normal" 正常 and "abnormal" 不正常 were often used within these contexts to describe alternative concepts as the unnatural way and behavior (Kam 2015, 79).

Furthermore, sex outside marital relationship was not tolerated according to official standards (Palmer 1995). Family-planning was bound to marriage in the way that couples without an official marriage certificate were not able to gain a *hukou* for their children. The aforementioned propagation of *suzhi* influenced these kinds of family planning policies. Officials were concerned about the large numbers of "low quality" births in the rural areas and used different educational and restrictive methods to control the population (Palmer 1995, 127).

The commercialization of parts of the Chinese media intensified the stereotypical representation of women (Zhao and Xing 2012). From the 1990s on, the media began to stage stories, which were interesting to a wider readership like investigative journalism and "true crime" stories and attention-seeking tabloids (Yuezhi Zhao 2002, Anagnost 2004). Stories about the lower strata population began to focus on individual fates. Even though the commercialization of Chinese media influenced the representation positively in that they began to present the migrating population not as homogeneous (as had been the case in the 1980s), these representations were influenced by market mechanisms. It became important what sold best. Ann Anagnost and Sun Wanning both believe that stories about individuals of the lower strata of Chinese society should satisfy voyeuristic tensions in the readership to differentiate themselves from the "uncivilized" citizens with a low *suzhi* (Anagnost 2004, 200, Sun Wanning 2004).

Similar to the aforementioned positive representation of Xiong Deming there are also developments of how media represents undesirable ideas of gender in regard to (rural) women, mostly through emphasizing their abnormality and their negative impact on society.

The stereotypification of the “second wife” 二奶⁶ is one of such developments. The term originally arises from Cantonese term *yih naaih* (in Mandarin *er nai*). It has a vulgar meaning and refers to concubinage in traditional China (Xiao 2012, 624 footnote 1). It is linked to Hongkongnese and Taiwanese businessmen who came to the Pearl River Delta where they often established an extramarital affair. In media the representation of the “second wife” is linked to scandal, crime and betrayal, with images of women with rural *hukou* and a lower social stance who would come to the cities to fish for rich men. In TV series, such as *Red Spiders*, the women were represented as greedy husband stealers who would even kill to reach their goals (Zheng 2007, 98). They were represented as a threat to urban women and portrayed as responsible for high divorce rates. They were portrayed as responsible for corruption by seducing party officials to gain influence and status (ibid.). Often these different representations lead to new lines between women themselves with representing the rural women as the biggest threat to the urban women, which is seen in recent discussions on social media, as well.⁷

Social narratives on gender roles are influenced by national discourses, traditional values and reinforced by commercial market mechanisms. Thereby, the responsibility of the individual is stressed: Women are expected to fulfill their tasks as wives *and* workers for a national common good and social harmony.

⁶ The saying “to keep a second wife” 包二奶 shows the uneven economic power relations within these relationships with the women being dependent on the wealthy man. The translation to “second wife” sounds like an embellishment, since the “second wife” does not have any protection under the Chinese law and therefore acts in an illegal social position.

⁷ In 2016 a video went viral which showed a woman from Anhui beating down the lover of her husband. The comments range from solidarity with the wife, to disapproving the lover for being sexually active, to solidarity with the lover. <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/woman-beating-husbands-mistress/> (08/08/2019)

3 Views on marriage in *Female Workers: A Record*

3.1 The relation between Zheng Xiaoqiong and her protagonists

Before explaining how Zheng Xiaoqiong presents her personal relation to the protagonists in her *Female Workers: A Record*, I will shortly write about her biography, since she refers to her personal experience as a worker in the anthology. Born in 1980 Zheng Xiaoqiong grew up in the town Nanchong in Sichuan.⁸ Zheng Xiaoqiong was trained as a nurse and worked in a local hospital, before she moved to Dongguan in 2001. In Dongguan she worked in several different factories, including a furniture factory, a wool mill, a metal hardware factory, and a shoe factory. During her time in the Dongguan she started writing poems, mostly about homesickness, her personal condition, work at the assembly line and life in the factory. In the beginning, she sent her poems to a small local newspaper. In 2006, her first collection *Huangma Ling* 黄麻岭 was published which later was awarded with the Lu Xun Award of Guangdong Province. Since her breakthrough as a writer in 2007 after receiving the widely recognized *Liqun* prize from the well-established magazine *People's Literature*, Zheng Xiaoqiong has become a very popular writer in China. After attending a writer's workshop organized by the Writers Association of Guangdong Province and the literary magazine *Artworks* 作品 in 2008, Zheng Xiaoqiong began a temporary position at the literary magazine. She became a permanent employee of the magazine from September 2009 on. She became a member of the China Writers Association in 2010. In 2016 she was appointed as its vice editor in chief. By now, the Guangzhou-based poet became a national and international celebrated star.

In *Female Workers*, Zheng Xiaoqiong includes poems and fourteen prose texts about over 100 women. These poems are inspired by women in her closer and wider environment, such as friends, co-workers, neighbors, relatives and friends of co-workers. She meets them in factories where she worked, on trains, in her neighborhood and in chatrooms on QQ. Sometimes her poems originate from a short encounter, sometimes they are the product of a long-maintained friendship. The voice of the author herself appears in the form of the lyrical 'I'.

In the afterword, Zheng Xiaoqiong refers to her personal connection with the individuals. She understands herself as one of them, she stresses her own experience in the factory and the

⁸ For information on Zheng Xiaoqiong's biography I refer to Zhou (2015), Zheng (2017b), Sun (2012b, 2014b), van Crevel 2017.

life at the assembly line. Furthermore, she underlines her own stance by drawing a line between her position and the position of journalists and media reporters:

“More often, [the female workers] are represented by the media, in speeches, in the news and so on using a single collective name, what they use is [the plural suffix] *men*. I am one of those *men* 们, to this I have deep feelings.”

更多的时候，她们被媒体、报告、新闻等用一个集体的名字代替，用的“们”字。我是这个“们”中的一员，对此我深有感受 (Zheng 2012, 252).

She is not interested in presenting the female workers as a big homogeneous group. It becomes her personal quest to transform the plural “they” 们 into a “she” 她, to stress the individual in her work (ibid., 253).

The focus on the individual is established in titles of the poems; most of them bear the name of a woman. In the afterword and interviews, she notes that it was important to her to call the women by their name. In the work environment of the factory, Zheng Xiaoqiong experienced how workers were called after the province which they came from or after their work-position. When Zheng Xiaoqiong worked at the assembly line, she called her co-workers by their name, which pleased and surprised them. To the poet, “the name of every person implies their dignity.” 每个人的名字都意味着她的尊严 (Zheng 2012, 275). Furthermore, she often uses the term *gongyou* 工友. Similar to addressing the women by her name, this term expresses a form of sympathy and connection. The term is often used among workers themselves, as Yu Chunsen explains (Yu 2018, 36-39). It is the combination of “worker” 工人 and “friend” 朋友, and expresses sentiments of relation and affiliation (ibid.).

At the same time the poet admits her outsider role and changing social position. In the afterword of *Female Workers: A Record* she writes about the time when she became a person of public concern after gaining the *Liqun* prize. She writes:

“I spared no effort to escape the attention of the media, I feared that my colleagues would find out, feared that my neighbors would find out, I rejected many media interviews, they wanted to interview me in the place where I lived, I rejected all, I knew when I wanted to write a thing like this, I had to deeply enter into neighbors life, had to become a person like them, only when it was like this they would tell me about the realities of their existence.”

我尽力地逃避着媒体关注，我怕我的同事知道，怕我的老板知道，怕我的邻居知道，我拒绝很多媒体的采访，她们想采访我居住的现场，我都拒绝了，我知道自己将要写什么样的东西，我必须深入到邻居的生活中，成为他们一样的人，只有这样她们才会告诉我她们真实的生存状态 (Zheng 2012, 250).

Zheng Xiaoqiong is worried about the fragile connection to her co-workers, neighbors and friends. She is afraid that her position as a successful poet would distance her from the other workers. Zheng Xiaoqiong shows an awareness for her own social position. This awareness is also expressed in the poem “A Min” 阿敏, where she portrays a young female worker poet. Different than Zheng Xiaoqiong, A Min is not able to leave the worker life behind through writing (Zheng 2012, 116ff.). After an affair with an older male poet with an urban *hukou*, A Min decides to leave the city to continue to search for work in other cities.

3.2 Returning home to arranged dating

Zheng Xiaoqiong portrays teenage girls, young, middle-aged and old women. They come from different parts of China, most of them have a rural background and occupy different professions.

In poems like “Liu Meili” 刘美丽, “Li Juan” 李娟, “Shu Miao” 舒苗, Zheng Xiaoqiong portrays young women who leave their home village to search for work in cities. With only 17 years the young woman who is portrayed in “Liu Meili” already works in an electronic factory. Liu Meili's monthly salary, 1000 RMB, makes her feel rich: It “can satisfy her little girl's heart” 能满足她少女的心 (Zheng 2012, 23) and makes it even possible for her to send some money home to her family. Her job enables her to support her family at home and make her “the role model of the girl who left the countryside” 乡间外出女子的榜样. (ibid.) The poem portrays the young woman as virtuous daughter. To not become a burden to her family at home, she decides to go to the city to work.

Besides pious motivations to be a good daughter there is another motivation which is represented in the poems : the young women came to the city to escape the strictures of the village. In “Shu Miao” the young protagonist wanted to escape the fate of becoming a farmer. To her, “work in the factory after all is more relaxed than working on the farm at home.” “打工毕竟比在家种地要轻松也要有出息” (Zheng 2012, 27) This line is particularly interesting because it is set in quotation marks in the poem itself. This direct speech lets us assume that it

was Shu Miao herself who expressed her opinion. In many other poems, Zheng Xiaoqiong uses direct speech to give her protagonists voices.

Similar to Shu Miao the protagonist in the poem “Li Juan” came to the city to leave behind her rural life. Zheng Xiaoqiong compares the energetic young women Li Juan to a frog. By 18, she jumped out of the traditional life in her home village, into the urban jungle made of steel (Zheng 2012, 25). The metaphor of the frog is reminiscent of the Chinese idiom “the frog in the well” 井底之蛙 which is used to describe how an individual’s vision is inevitably limited and how people often fail to see the big picture. Li Juan is the frog who leaves her rural well to discover the opportunities of city life. To Li Juan, moving to the city seemed to be a way to escape a “traditional fate” 传统的命运, she does not want to repeat the life of her ancestors (Zheng 2012, 25).

However, both Li Juan as well as Shu Miao are confronted with the difficulties of being women from the countryside: it is hard for them to find social and material stability in the cities. Like a frog who jumps into cement, Li Juan seems to be trapped. She moves between factories, she seeks for opportunities but does not know what to do next. Shu Miao finds herself in a similar dissatisfying condition. The wages never arrive in time, Shu Miao cannot stop working, because there are too many orders. In the poem there often appears the term *bi jing* 毕竟 which can be translated to “at least” or “after all”, to express that she is willing to accept her situation: at least the factory’s dormitory would be in good condition, at least her situation could be worse.

In Shu Miao’s life as a migrant worker, marriage seems to be the point which introduces a new phase of her life, which might help her to settle. Shu Miao decides to “return home to an arranged date” 回家相亲 (Zheng 2012, 25).

The term *xiangqin* 相亲 appears 20 times in the whole anthology, mostly in poems about young women like Shu Miao and Li Juan. I translated it to “arranged dating”. To Li Juan, returning to her home village seems to be a contradiction, because it was actually the life in the village which she wanted to escape from. However, she is afraid to not find a suitable partner after reaching a certain age:

“[...] Old maids are hard to marry she is confused by inner contradictions
Return home to an arranged date or change jobs to seek opportunity [...]”
老姑娘难嫁 她纠结于内心的矛盾
回家相亲 还是跳槽寻找机会 (Zheng Xiaoqiong 2012, 25).

Li Juan is uncertain about her next steps. She is not satisfied with her position in the city, but she does not want to return to her home village either. At the same time, Li Juan is afraid of being a woman in her late 20s and still not married.

In “Chen Shan” 陈珊 the portrait woman fears aging, too. Different to Li Juan, Chen Shan does not work in a factory but in an office, where she experiences the fights around job positions. She objects arranged dates but feels pressured by her own age: “The age of 27 is perceived as tragedy in the countryside” 二十七岁的年龄在乡间被喻为悲剧 (Zheng 2012, 43).

Chen Shan is afraid that she might turn into an unmarried woman who is older than 27. In China there exists the term “left-over women” *sheng nü* 剩女 which mostly describes women over the age of 27 who are not married but with high educational degrees and economic independence. The term is used in a context to describe female (and male) singledom as an abnormal development in society (Zhang & Sun 2014, 124-128). Zheng Xiaoqiong does not use the term *sheng nü*, but the verb “to remain” or “to be left over” 剩下:

“[...] From the arranged date to the marriage only two months left
She does not know what to do also is unable to refuse left over
The inner dispute is even more complicated than the office dispute [...]
从相亲到结婚 只有两个月
她不知所措 也无法拒绝 剩下
内心的纷争比办公室政治还复杂 (Zheng 2012, 43).

Even though “Chen Shan” is not willing to marry a man who she never met before, she is afraid of not being able to find a suitable partner for marriage. At the same time, she longs for romantic love: She seeks for love in Korean soap operas, goes traveling to find what she is missing. In the end, she agrees to marry somebody from her home village, which she regrets shortly after the marriage. Only a few days after the marriage she goes to Dongguan under the pretext that she urgently would have to work again (ibid.).

3.3 Marriage as a way of escape

In some of the poems, social obligations and aging play into the considerations of the protagonists. In other poems, Zheng Xiaoqiong presents marriage as a form of escape from one’s own living conditions. The poem “Zhou Hong” 周红 portrays a young woman, who

decides to leave her home with a fellow villager. In Guangdong, Zhou Hong works in the sex industry, in ominous hair-salons, bars and small restaurants. In the poem, Zheng Xiaoqiong highlights the topic of abortion (Zheng 2012, 17). Plagued by abortion and sexual disease, marriage becomes the turning point in Zhou Hong's life. Through marriage, she is able to return to "regular tracks" 正常的轨道 (ibid.). She marries a husband outside the sex industry. Her husband's family is silent about her past. For a while, it is possible for her to "return to the role of the virtuous wife" 你返回一个贤妻的角色 (ibid.).

After marriage, Zhou Hong is expected to bear children to her husband and his family. However, because of her former abortions, she is unable to bear children. In the end, the couple gets divorced and Zhou Hong returns into the sex industry.

In the poem "Yang Hong" 杨红, the young protagonist becomes a victim of human trafficking. To Yang Hong, marriage also seems to be a turning point, it is a possibility for her to get out of sex work and build a family. However, Yang Hong's two marriages end in failure: Both of her husbands go to jail, leaving her behind with a small daughter. In this way, Yang Hong is able to be a mother but not a wife.

In the following prose text about the two poems Zheng Xiaoqiong explains how she heard about the stories of the two women from a co-worker (Zheng 2012, 18-21). She connects their two stories to a newspaper article in the *Southern Weekend* 南方周末 titled "A village, changed by 'chickenheads'" 《被“鸡头”们改变的村庄》. The term "chickenhead" 鸡头 describes former migrant workers who return to their home village to lure young women into the city, where they have to work in the sex industry, as Zheng Xiaoqiong explains (Zheng 2012, 18). From what her colleagues tell Zheng and what she reads in the article, Yang Hong and Zhou Hong do not represent single cases. Zheng Xiaoqiong describes that, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many villages became hotbeds of local corruption: local cadres would hire criminal gangs to blackmail rural families to pay high taxes. If the families would not have the money to pay the taxes these gangs would plunder the household of the families and would take every valuable object.

Zheng expresses incomprehension for why these women and villagers engage in sex industries and human trafficking. She tries to ask for reasons but accepts that shame and humiliation hinder the women to talk about their experience. Furthermore, Zheng Xiaoqiong stresses the young women's lack of education: They would not know much about motherhood and sexual protection and easily become pregnant (ibid.). In the cases of these young women, marriage seems to be the point of escape:

“I met these women who were engaged in this business [sex industry], they seem to be separated into two groups, generally speaking, after marriage, if they bore children, life simply moved towards normal lines, they would return to the normal role of the mother, the daughter-in-law, the wife, life slowly would become steady. If they would marry and would not get children, after some years, the majority would get divorced.”

我遇到从事这个行业的女性，她们似乎分成两个群体，一般来说，结婚后，如果生育了小孩，生活便走向正常轨道，返回到母亲、儿媳、妻子的正常角色，生活慢慢稳定下来。如果结婚没有生育，几年后，大部分人都离婚了(Zheng 2012, 20).

Zheng Xiaoqiong points out that to women like Yang Hong and Zhou Hong marriage and becoming a mother seems to be crucial to find stability. Motherhood forms an extra guarantee to not be abandoned by the husband and the family-in-law. In a few cases, some women would be lucky to marry into a prosperous urban household or become the “second wives” 二奶 of bureaucrats (ibid.). These women would be able to send money to their own families or help their relatives to find work.

Marriage is related to social and material status. In the poem “Zhu Qing” 竹青, Zheng writes about a former friend who like the poet herself is unwilling to accept the unfair situation of workers in the factories. They share their ideas and convictions in QQ chatrooms and also exchange journals. Zheng Xiaoqiong presents her friend as an intelligent woman who questions the status quo of the individual. Zheng points out that the lyrical I and her friend neither fit into the role of the worker nor into the role of intellectual (Zheng 2012, 7f.). Their discussions about political issues sound strange to other workers in the factories. At the same time, their social status hinders them from becoming intellectuals. The lyrical I feels a connection between the two women, due to their intellect and their outsider position among other workers.

Over the years they lose sight of each other. When the lyrical I meets her friend again, she is disappointed. Zhu Qing seems to have lost all interest in political topics. She is concerned with material things, such as cars, perfumes and luxurious handbags. In the prose text which follows the poem, the narrator connects the change of her friend Zhu Qing to the change of her marital status. Zhu Qing first became the mistress and then the “second wife” of a Taiwanese. Reflecting on her situation Zhu Qing says:

“In reality, we only pretend to turn a blind eye, so we can be a bit happy, why should I let myself feel painful, anyway, we do not have the capability to change it all.”

‘对于现实，我们只有装着视而不见，这样才会快乐一点，何必让自己那么痛苦呢，反正，我们没有能力去改变这一切’ (Zheng 2012, 10).

Zhu Qing is no longer concerned with politics and injustice. She wants to be happy and finds this happiness in the wealth of her husband. Zhu Qing is surprised that her friend still writes “useless poetry” 无用的诗歌 (Zheng 2012, 9). Even though the two women are now separated by their interests and social status, the narrator shows appreciation for the change of her former friend:

“In reality, time continuously degrades our lives, our former anger and dreams, facing reality in this way is weak, we are continuously disappointed, very disappointed, change into a kind of despair, accept despair, or howl.”

现实中，时间不断降解着我们的生活，我们曾经的愤怒与理想在现实面前是那样的虚弱，我们不断地失望，失望多了，成了一种绝望，在绝望中接受，或者嚎叫 (Zheng, 2012, 11).

Through marriage, Zhu Qing could escape from the miseries of her existence. Marriage becomes an opportunity to emancipate oneself from the hardships of rural life in China and life as an outcast in the city.

3.5 The “natural” life cycle of becoming a wife

In many poems wifedom and marriage is represented as the “natural” wish of every woman. Many protagonists in the poems are ready to become “virtuous wives and good mothers”. However, they are unable to meet the demands of these social gender roles and their own needs, at the same time.

In “Yao Lin” 姚琳 Zheng Xiaoqiong describes how the general life of a rural women should look like: first there comes the work – either for the boss or on the farm, then comes marriage, then the birth and raising of children, before one gets old like one’s parents did before (Zheng 2012, 6). To Yao Lin,

“There is no so-called loss there is also no victory just remain
Alive [...]”
没有所谓失败 也就没有胜利 只剩下
活着 [...] (ibid.).

Even though Yao Lin wants to accept her faith as a wife and mother, it is hard for her to fit into her social role as a wife and mother. She is afraid that her children will become disobedient, because she had to leave them in the village while she works in the city, she is afraid that her husband might have an affair (ibid.). Yao Lin is willing to accept her social obligations but cannot ignore the injustice which is done to her.

In another poems “Gong Qiong” 龚琼, the 25-year old protagonist is betrayed by her husband. This betrayal is expressed through direct speech: ““What I betrayed is only the body which cannot be controlled the soul forever belongs to you”” 无法控制的肉体 灵魂永远属于你 and ““I am an ordinary man also have regular desires for physical bodies”” 我是正常的男人 也有 肉体的正常欲望 (Zheng 2012, 87).

The action of the individual is referred to as a natural and implied in gender; Gong Qiong’s husband refers to his action as a natural male habit. After the divorce Gong Qiong wants to break free from her dependency on marriage and wifeness. She writes in her diary: “Life cannot be Controlled by the hand of somebody else” “生活不能被 别人的手操纵” (Zheng 2012, 88) At the same time she doubts the possibilities to change her own destiny
:

“[...] You only know the everyday amount of 14000 [molded] holes⁹
Wage is 1240 RMB high The girl from the countryside
in Henan Sometimes, someone mentions arranged dating or
the next marriage they constitute your whole fate”
你只知道每天一万四千个孔的数量
工资一千两百四十块 河南乡下的
女儿 偶尔有人说起相亲或者
下一次婚姻 它们构成你全部的命运 (Zheng 2012, 88).

⁹ Gong Qiong works at an injection molding machine in a hardware factory.

She seems to be restricted by her own circumstances. With a wage of 1240 RMB, her future prospects are not bright. In this way, marriage is a way to cope with the hardships and difficulties of her life.

Reading the poems in *Female Workers*, it becomes hard to believe that there are any women who could exist outside a heterosexual marriage. Thereby, the women who are unable to be wives run into social and political discrimination. In the poem “Lin Yumei” 林玉梅 the young protagonist is happy to marry into a financially comfortable family, based in Guangzhou. However, her husband dies in a car accident. After his death, the young woman is confronted with discrimination:

“You only can cry alone bitterly a stranger and a native person
“fishing sister” lives comfortably the dead husband cannot
give you comfort again [...]”
你只能独自痛哭 外乡人与本地人
“捞妹”享福了 死去的丈夫不会
再给你安慰 (Zheng 2012, 39).

The term “捞妹” which I translated into “fishing sister”, is used in Guangdong.¹⁰ It describes women from other areas of China who would come to Guangdong to find a marriage partner, these women would “fish” for husbands, in fact men with an urban *hukou*. Lin Yumei is not only confronted to discriminatory language, but also institutional discrimination; after the death of her husband, his property is denied to her.

Similar to the media, Zhen Xiaoqiong’s focus lies on heterosexual monogamous wifehood, marriage and partnership, alternative relationship concepts such as polyamory or same-sex relationships do not exist in the anthology. Furthermore, the poet focuses on the representation of people who identify as cis-women or who are portrayed by her as cis-women. Other gender identities, such as transgender, or intersexuality are left out.

In her representation of womanhood, no alternative concepts to marriage exist. Zheng Xiaoqiong portraits singledom as something no woman could be happy with. The young unmarried women all aim for arranged dating, even if their main motivation for this, seems to be the fear of becoming an old maid. Women who remained unmarried are portrayed in a way of uncertainty, as in “Cao Tao” 曹涛 where the 33-year old unmarried women does not know

¹⁰ <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%8D%9E%E5%A6%B9> (last access: 20/06/2019)

where to go and what to do next (Zheng 2012, 57f.). By representing the female migrant worker's negative experience with marriage and wifeness, Zheng Xiaoqiong gives alternative representations of gender roles. These representations might be influenced by national discourses and traditional values, as well. However, they question the responsibility of the individual. No woman seems to be able to fulfill their demanding tasks which society puts on them.

4 Positioning Zheng Xiaoqiong

The relation between Zheng's biography and her lyrical work often provoked critics to position the poet within the context of *dagong* poetry. Positioning Zheng Xiaoqiong, I particularly focused on discussion around the aspects of moral value, language aesthetics and gender. Further, I will give a general overview of the generic *dagong* poetry.

4.1 Cultural gatekeepers and the generic *dagong* poetry

When talking about the poetry scene in China and elsewhere, it is important to understand that the poetry scene does not only exist out of poems, poets and readers, but should be understood as a wide field of different actors and multi-layered processes. In the case of Chinese poetry scene, the field is often divided into official and unofficial spheres. By official I mean the processes that take place within literary enterprises and that are controlled and promoted by the Chinese state. Contrary, the unofficial sphere exists outside the official channels, processes are often non-state-approved and not promoted by government authorities (van Crevel 2008, 7f., Inwood, 37). Participants of the literature scene move in-between official and unofficial spheres, as explained below.

Even though it is poets like Zheng Xiaoqiong who create the discussed work, there are others who have gained cultural authority on *dagong* poetry and literature. These cultural gatekeepers possess cultural and social capital to carry the poets' works into a public space. They know how to interact in the literary sphere and have connections to other actors, such as editors, publishers, critics, and so on. Many cultural gatekeepers have social status and relations to raise attention to the matter itself.

In the case of *dagong* poetry, the name for the genre was coined by one of these cultural gatekeepers, the then literary critic and now cultural president of the Shenzhen Cultural Alliance Yang Honghai 楊宏海. He was among the first to “discover” the *dagong* poetry scribbled on the wall of a public toilet, in the mid-1980s when he walked through the streets of Shenzhen, particularly Shekou Industrial Zone, as Sun Wanning mentions (Sun 2014b, 157). He is credited to be the first to use the terms “*dagong* literature” 打工文学 and “*dagong* poetry” 打工诗歌 in media, literary forums and academic discussion. Sun Wanning concludes that it was his privileged position as part of a cultural elite which made it possible for him to call attention to *dagong* poetry, also in connection to local culture politics in Shenzhen.

The local governments of the Pearl River Delta supported and promoted the literary works concerning workers from an early stage on. Li Si-Ming, Cheng Hung-Ha and Wang Jun conclude that by the beginning 2000s it became important to develop a cultural brand for Shenzhen and other cities in the Pearl River Delta because many enterprises – and therefore, also citizens – moved their factories to cheaper production places (Li et al. 2014, 157). Besides the promotion of *dagong* poetry, other forms of cultural migrant worker production became the target of local political promotion, for example the Dafen Oil Painting village which is known as the biggest production side for copied paintings (Li et al. 2014).

The Zhanjiang Normal University in Guangdong set up a research center for Southern poetry. Its aim is to “study the social and cultural significance of poetry originating in or depicting ‘the south’ – including the works of *dagong* writer” (Sun 2014b, 171). Furthermore, two government-funded museums which address *dagong* culture were established in Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Maghiel van Crevel observed differences in how the two museums were set up in comparison to the museum of the non-governmental organization Migrant Workers Home 工友之家 in Picun, which does not get official funding and was established by workers themselves (van Crevel, 2019).

Cultural support by local governments and authorities plays an important part in letting the worker’s poetic voices get heard. Li Daqun, head of a labor NGO in Beijing, pointed out that the poetry of construction workers does not get as much attention as the Southern *dagong* poetry (Sun 2014b, 169f.). To him, this is partly because there do not exist government bodies, cultural elites or commercial press which would particularly promote the writings of construction workers and in this way build a similar brand around them (ibid.).

In the last 30 years, the interaction between people engaged in literature and poetry changed due to new communication possibilities, first and foremost the internet. Nowadays, people do not only communicate over official channels but via social media, internet forums and self-publishing sites. Michel Hockx and Heather Inwood point out that these processes for publishing create new possibilities for people to interact and exchange with each other because they bypass official channels for publishing (Hockx 2015, Inwood 2014). To Heather Inwood, being a “poet-citizen” involves participation in multiple media spaces (Inwood 2014, 8). Poets, cultural officials, readers and critics all actively reach out to others with similar interests and beliefs in poetry and writing. Poets use WeChat, Weibo and their own homepages to publish their work and come together to discuss poetry. However, self-publishing has its limits: To gain success and the ability to live from writing, poets are dependent on people with the necessary connections and know-how to raise attention to the poet’s work.

When talking about Zheng Xiaoqiong, in the beginning of her career as a poet she moved in-between the spheres of the official publishing and self-published production. Zheng Xiaoqiong did not only send her poems to local newspapers and magazines but published her own writings on her Weibo-account.¹¹ She actively reached out to the literature scene and came in contact with other writers, such as the poets Fang Zhou 方舟, Feng Zhengwu 彭争武 and Fa Xing 发星.

Her receiving the *Liqun* prize from a well-established Chinese literature magazine, could be understood as a key moment in her career. Her work became known to the public. Moreover, there arose a discussion about her persona; it was reported that she had declined to join the Dongguan Writers' Association (Sun 2012b). She was reported to have refused this membership because of her close connectedness to the workers. In fact, she only had refused a position in the office of the Dongguan Writers Association because it was during this time that she worked on *Female Workers* and did not want to interrupt her work (van Crevel 2017a). Zheng Xiaoqiong was able to access the official spheres of Chinese literature scene: She joined the Writer's Association on a national level in 2010, she became the vice director of *Artworks* 作品 and is now in the position of being able to live from her literary work.

4.2 Moral value versus language aesthetics

The change of her social and cultural position influenced how she was perceived as a poet. This is not only due to her career development but also due to discussions about the generic itself. Commentators and critics praise the social value of *dagong* poetry: Poetry by the workers is read in the context of "New Left" 新左派 literature in China. The term "New Left" covers a wide spectrum of leftist theories and schools. New Left intellectuals draw their ideas from Marxism, socialism, the Frankfurt School, postmodernism, postcolonialism and others (Ban & Jie 2012). Generally speaking, the New Left criticizes global capitalism and aspects of Chinese economic politics.

Some New Left intellectuals read *dagong* poetry as an evidence for social realities and critic on social inequalities, global capitalism and environmental pollution. For example, the literature professor Gong Haomin 龔浩敏 reads Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry as a form of

¹¹ <http://blog.sina.com.cn/xiaoqiong81> (last access: 08/08/2019)

“ecopoetry” which would deal with physical and spiritual homelessness of migrant workers and their “estranged relation to the environment” (Gong 2018, 259).

In another article, Gong Haomin calls *dagong* poetry more generally a form of “lower culture” (Gong 2012, 147). He would call *dagong* poetry “lower poetry” because it engages with the lower strata of society. The term “low culture” has been used to distinguish between the intellectual aspirations of popular and high culture. The classification of *dagong* poetry in “low culture” reflects the anticipation, that common *dagong* poetry would have defects when it comes to language aesthetics.

Authors refer to Zheng Xiaoqiong’s biography when they praise her writing style. She is celebrated as an exceptional talent, whose language use and identity as a writer “can never be fully captured by the noun ‘laborer’” as Zhang Qinhu writes it in an essay (Zhang 2010, 35).

For some literary critics of *dagong* poetry it seems rather surprising that writers from the low strata of society could produce aesthetic work. In relation to this, critics like Liu Dongwu refer to the worker’s qualities: *Dagong* poetry would not “possess the ‘comprehensive *suzhi*’ (*zonghe suzhi* 综合素质) of mainstream poetry, because *dagong* poets have not acquired the basic rules of language games in poetry writing” (cited in Sun 2012b, 1005). Yang Honghai used terms such as “coarse” and “primitive” to describe the language of *dagong* poetry (ibid.).

It is somehow ambivalent that spokespeople of *dagong* poetry refer to the “quality” of *dagong* poets. As I explained in the previous chapter the term *suzhi* is mainly used to explain and justify the developmental discrepancy between rural and urban areas in China. It is used by people to differentiate themselves from others by their education and social position. In this sense, the discussions about *dagong* poetry are influenced by medial representation and social prejudice of the workers. Discussions about *dagong* poetry emphasize how authors are read in their social position and refuse them to enter a wider sphere of literary narratives. Essentializing the biographical background repeats processes of social exclusion on the level of the official literature scene. Poets who write about the experience of a marginalized group and often identify as part of this marginalized group are pigeonholed under certain criteria. In reverse, authors who write about marginalized experience without referring to a “marginalized background” are shunned for a lack of authenticity.

4.2 Zheng Xiaoqiong’s own position

For these reasons, Zheng Xiaoqiong refuses to be called a *dagong* poet. She does not want her work to be pigeonholed to the label of *dagong* poetry. She does not want to be made a hero

or spokeswoman of class-struggle or the other extreme, a success-story about social raise (Zhou 2015, 57).

In an interview for the *Southern Daily* 南方日报, she criticizes the creation of the poetic generic. She claims that nobody would care about what is behind the label, or “corset” 马甲 as she calls it (Fan 2012). People would pay more attention to the social background of the authors than the content of the poems themselves.

She shares similar views when her work and persona are read in other literary generics; for example within the context of Chinese “women’s poetry” 女性诗歌 which formed in the 1980s and in the 1990s (Jaguścik 2016, 6). Academics, such as the feminist cultural critic Dai Jinhua 戴锦花, criticized the generic in certain contexts. Women’s poetry would have been defined in too narrow a sense, it would be subjugated to male or masculine writings, the term would be used to essentialize femininity and therefore reinforce gender bias (cited in Jaguścik 2016, 13).

Because a big part of her oeuvre is specifically focused on female experience, Zheng Xiaoqiong was read in the context of female literature (Jaguścik 2016, 2018). In her anthology *Pedestrian Overpass* 人行天桥, she calls herself a “half-feminist” 半个女权主义者 and demands that the penis should be judged in the same way as the female breasts are judged (ibid.). Despite her emphasis on female experiences and female-read suffering in her poetry, Zheng Xiaoqiong refuses the women’s poetry label, as well. When I asked her in an email, how she estimates the role of female writers in the literary scene, she answered:

“Women’s poetry already became a huge community in China, from the outside it seems, that my poems have an intense realistic and social character, it is especially the critical spirit of many poems, the techniques of expression are complicated and enormous, it really is not what they expect to have the typical criteria of Chinese traditional female poetry, I’m often [understood] to be an exception, including [the opinions] of my fellow poets, who all think that I am an exception. My poems have an intense female characteristic, they include wording and from the perspective of the interest, it is easy to find female characteristics, but they are hidden behind intense social and realistic characteristics, [which are] sometimes ignored by people. Similar to many other places around the world, female poets and authors because of their gender make people pay attention to them, but also because of this [they] are difficult to ignore, our literature body and aesthetics are still dominated by men, I discussed this issue already with many foreign

authors, it is the circumstances of the minority, the marginalized, female writers and poets' work.”

女性诗歌在中国已经成为了一个庞大的群体的，外界看来，我的诗歌中因为有强烈的现实性以及社会性，特别是很多诗歌批判精神，表现手法复杂而庞大，并非是他们所想象那样具有典型的中国传统的女性诗歌的特点，我常常被例外，包括我跟我同代诗人，都觉得我是一个例外。尽管在我的诗歌中有强烈的女性特色，包括用词与关注角度从文本看来，很容易找到女性特征，但是它们藏在强烈的社会性与现实性背后，常常被人忽视。像世界很多地方一样，女性诗人与作家因为性别会让人关注，但是也因为这些而被难忽视，我们的文学主体与审美还是以男性为主体，这个问题，我跟不少国外作家也谈论过，就是少数的、边缘的、女性的作家与诗人的作品境遇 (Zheng, personal communication, 14/07/2019).

Her answer suggests that she does not want to be associated with female literature but that she wants her work to be understood as unique. She concludes that the literary field in China as well as other countries is particularly dominated by men and for female writers the reference to their gender is both a blessing and a curse. It is the emphasis of personal experience within a marginalized social position. However, the emphasis on being marginalized often labels and pigeonholes writers into a singular category, resulting in accusations that these writers are exploiting their own identities to be more marketable. Zheng Xiaoqiong's denial of labels can then be understood as a form of agency against marginalization. By denying adjectives such as “female”, “oppressed”, “socially and economically disadvantaged” she stresses the relevance of her poetic work for the wider sphere of literature.

Even though Zheng Xiaoqiong does not want to be represented as an idol or success-story, a *dagong* poet or a feminist writer, she remains concerned with migrating workers. In an e-mail, she wrote that she started to write poetry because she wanted to express the horrible conditions of the community where she herself came from. She is concerned about the suffering of migrating workers not only in China but in other countries, as well (personal communication, 20/11/2018).

5 Conclusion

In the anthology *Female Workers: A Record*, Zheng Xiaoqiong presents voices of female migrant workers who reflect on their experience within predefined gender roles. These representations of workers stand contrary to mainstream narratives in the Chinese media and society. Influenced by national narratives, gender asymmetries and the structural differences between rural and urban China, migrant workers are often represented as the outsiders in the urban environment. While medial representations stress the responsibility of the individual to improve their own social position and status, structural discrimination in the political system and state responsibility are hardly addressed by the media. In similar ways, the media stresses the role of women as mothers and wives, namely, it is in the responsibility of a woman to be a good wife, serve their families and take care of their children. Women are expected to fulfill their tasks as wives and workers for the common good.

Zheng Xiaoqiong points out what it actually means to be trapped in these social positions by reflecting on the personal views and feelings of the women. She criticizes the current state of the female workers and their representation in social and media narratives. By giving the silent female worker a poetic voice, she opens up new perspectives on the representation of gender roles in society. Zheng Xiaoqiong takes over certain mainstream narratives by naming ideals of virtuous woman- and wifeness. However, she challenges the picture of the virtuous, brave, self-sacrificing woman by showing that it is hardly possible to live up to these ideals. Zheng Xiaoqiong addresses topics such as human trafficking and abortion in her poems, she writes about the outer conditions which make the women feel what they feel. She writes about their low payment and bodily fatigue, about the displacement of the women, about homesickness, uncertainty and non-belonging. Her poetry shows how women try to fit in stereotypical roles and at the same time are unable to ignore their own wishes, fears and miserable conditions. To me, her poems express a form of sisterhood as she emphasizes her own connection to the women, feeling like one of them and connecting to their struggles. Her anthology *Female Workers: A Record* is an important contribution as she adds alternative representations of womanhood and the experience of the Chinese workers. I read these alternative representations of experience as a form of strategic essentialism, because they challenge the firmly established, uneven power relations in a society. New forms of representation could initiate new discussions about social equality and distribution.

Because of her close connection to the workers Zheng Xiaoqiong is often positioned within the context of *dagong* poetry. It can be a curse and a blessing for authors and their work

to be assigned to a specific generic. On the one hand, being read as a *dagong* poet raises public attention. The personal stories of *dagong* poets and *dagong* authors touch many readers in China. Their stories are commonly shared topics in Chinese social media.¹² On the other hand, *dagong* poetry becomes a collective name for the individual author. Generics like *dagong* poetry or *dagong* literature are coined by many different actors, structures and processes of a literary field. Within these processes, certain characteristics are attributed to the generic. In the case of *dagong* poetry, the social importance is stressed, while the aesthetic value of work is downgraded by calling *dagong* poetry as a form of “low culture”. In this way, the author, when described as a *dagong* poet, is not recognized in a wider literary context. By dismissing these labels Zheng Xiaoqiong, stresses the importance of her work outside given roles or labels, she stresses her unique contribution to poetry. In her recent work *The Rose Manor* 玫瑰庄园 which was published in 2017 her poems set the focus on classical Chinese legends and local Sichuanese culture and history. It will be exciting for me to follow Zheng Xiaoqiong on her future career as a poet.

In this work, I solely focused on one writer. For future academic work, it would be interesting for me to focus on other writers and authors, as well as, artists and musicians, who identify as part of the Chinese migrant worker population. Cultural and artistic production by individuals from the lower strata of Chinese society is a relatively young phenomenon that only came up in the early 2000s. New communication technologies and the internet have created alternative ways of production and publication. It will be interesting to follow these new ways of publication and explore how they affect the literature scene in China.

¹² In 2017, the essay “I am Fan Yusu” 我是范雨素 by the 44-year-old Fan Yusu was viewed over 1.5 million times, widely shared, and commented on Weibo. <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/fan-yusu-beijing-migrant-workers-writing-takes-wechat-storm/> (last access: 09/09/2019)

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