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Cultural Policy and Subaltern Cultural Production in China: The Case of Poet Xiao Hai

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*My third thesis is for my mum
Who cannot read English
And cannot read Chinese
But can read me*

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Introduction

*I am a Chinese worker
every corner of the world is disseminated with our revolutionary companions
perhaps due to our intention perhaps forced by apathy
we all sit here decent and honest
with horse-feeding and wood-chopping hands we wander in the skies of the world*

To express its most intimate needs and thoughts, society in general has always had a powerful tool: literature. In China, literature, politics, and society have always been especially closely entangled. I will analyse how literature reflects the ways in which the lowest stratum of contemporary Chinese society – migrant workers in particular – adapts and reacts to the direction the country is taking politically, economically, and socially nowadays. More in detail, I will focus on migrant worker poetry, also known as battler poetry (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌), which is a prominent example of subaltern cultural production. My analysis of battler literature will confront the needs and feelings of the lowest stratum of society in relation to the very rapid social, economic, political, and technological growth that China has been experiencing for years – and it is still experiencing today. I will explore the way this is expressed both in cultural policy under the Xi Jinping administration and in poetry. I will investigate the encounters of these two vectors (which I will refer to as “from above” and “from below”), across a spectrum with opposition and conflicting interests on one hand, and compatibility, alignment, and mutual benefit on the other. In particular, the poet Xiao Hai 小海’s position will play a crucial role in this research as being at the same time part of the precariat and being supported by - or minimally amenable to - the government.

Those at the top of this page are the first lines from Xiao Hai’s poem *Zhongguo gongren* 中国工人 (“Chinese worker”), followed by Federico Picerni’s translation (Picerni 2021). I have chosen to open the introduction to my thesis in this way both because Xiao Hai is the subject of the case study of my research and therefore deserves due consideration here, but also because I believe that these few characters condense into poetic lines the answer to my main research question: What can Xiao Hai’s poetry tell us about the ways in which subaltern cultural production relates to cultural policy in present-day China?

I will divide my thesis in three chapters. The first chapter will be the most politically centered, with a focus mainly on the Party’s perspective on literary production and the resultant cultural policy. Here, I will analyse parts of Xi Jinping’s 2016 and 2021 speeches at the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (FLAC) and Chinese Writers Association (CWA), so primary sources will be the

priority. They will be useful in analysing how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) communicates to the people and other interlocutors such as foreign governments and the scholarly community. Relevant scholarship will be considered to contextualise Xi's speeches in relation to today's China; this includes publications on the Party line on literature and culture and on censorship.

Chapter two and three will be the sociological-literary part of the thesis and will analyse writings by battler authors belonging to the Chinese precarious workers world. Chapter two will contextualise the phenomenon of migrant workers and their literary production in social, historical, and political terms. I will analyse the conditions under which these migrant workers operate, the motivations behind their literary productions, and their socioeconomic position. The phenomenon of *gongyou zhi jia* 工友之家 (Migrant Workers Home) in Picun will also be part of this study and will be useful to comprehend in depth the actual condition of the workers. This part will draw on the rapidly growing body of scholarly publications on precarity and cultural production in China (the themed bibliography on "Migrant Workers and Subalternity" at the MCLC Resource Center will be a source). The sociological-literary part will be the core of this chapter: I will analyse an example of battler poetry I have translated to corroborate the sociological analysis and verify that the two perspectives - that of everyday life and that of literature - match.

Chapter three will be a case study on the migrant worker and poet Xiao Hai. This chapter will connect the first and the second, confronting government policy and subaltern cultural production. The life and work of poet Xiao Hai will be at the centre as a case study and his poems (as primary sources) will be analysed and placed in the context outlined above as well as scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature and culture more broadly. I will undertake an analysis of his relationship with the Chinese government both as a poet or cultural producer and as a precarious worker, which will stand as a connection between the so-called "literature from below" and "literature from above". In particular, I will study to what extent Xiao Hai's work can be seen as aligned with Xi Jinping's talks on literature and CCP's cultural policy, and to what extent it can be seen as diverging from these.

In the conclusion, I will collect the data gathered in the three chapters and draw the lines by outlining the role of migrant worker cultural production in the cultural policy of China today.

With this thesis I aim to contribute to the research in the field of battler poetry by analysing it in relation to the CCP's guidelines on how to make literature today. My intention is to analyse battler poetry after having sufficiently contextualised it, to understand its relationship with Chinese cultural policy and determine the degree of emancipation of the former towards the latter. My claim is that battler poetry is not a product of the CCP's cultural policy and is not shaped on it, but rather was and is still generated by the need of its own authors. This implies that the reason for the existence of

battler poetry and literature does not derive from any dictates “from above”. Thus, not a literature at the service of the Party, but an independent, emancipated and activist literature, which despite dealing with the themes most cherished by the socialist ideology, stands apart from it, so that its goal turns out to be very different from the ones of the CCP. At the end of my research, I expect to demonstrate that, among many other aspects which are part of this literary genre, one of the aims of battler poetry is to transform the silence of a social class into a cry of rebellion against their authors’ social, psychological and economic position. It is however necessary to point out that this is not about a simply and binary oppositions of oppressor and oppressed, because every artistic product is generated by a wide variety of factors which this thesis may not be able to include.

Chapter One: Literature from ‘Above’ – the Government’s Vision of Literature and Art, and the Resultant Cultural Policy

In this chapter, which will serve as background to contextualise the rest of my research, I will analyse the opening speech that Xi Jinping delivered on December 14th, 2021, at the 11th Congress of the FLAC and the 10th Congress of the CWA. I will also make some references to the previous speech, given on November 30th, 2016, at the 10th Congress of FLAC and the 9th Congress of CWA. I chose to start from this speech on contemporary literature in China and the role of artists and writers because I believe it is an effective representative for cultural policy in today’s People’s Republic of China (PRC), a clear manifesto of the position of the CCP on how to make literature in China today. In fact, the Party has taken an active interest on the role of artists and writers and has considered literature and art as part of its remit since the very beginning of its rise to power, especially considering the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942.

I will analyse Xi’s whole speech, which was recently published, starting from five keywords – one for each of the points it is divided into. This is anticipated by an introduction that contextualises the whole thing back since Yan’an.

The Background: an Overview of CCP’s Cultural Policy from Mao to Xi

The first official and relevant contact between the literature of the PRC and politics dates back to May 1942 in Yan’an, at the Forum on Literature and Art, commonly known as “Yan’an Talks”. This three-week conference host in a Communist base in Shaanxi province during the war against Japan. Here, Mao Zedong clarified the ambiguous role of writers and artists in the communist movement and the objectives and methods of communist art (Judd 1985, 383). The Talks were part of a bigger CCP project for the rectification of writers and artists to give them guidelines to accept the authority of the Party and their roles in revolution. The content of the two lectures is not original; it is a restatement of the ideas of the debates on revolutionary literature in 1920s from the first Chinese intellectuals like Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 who studied Soviet literary theory. These ideas were inspired by the soviet proletarian culture free from bourgeois influence, with the aim to fight liberalism with socialist realism (Denton 2016b, 226). Mao summed up the Party’s cultural policy by stating that mass culture had to be revolutionary (Liu 2000, 126), literature had to live up to socialist realism (Hockx 2016, 52) and be subservient to political interests, and writers had to write for and about peasants, workers and soldiers (Denton 2016a, 13). Literature had to go “in the direction in which the masses are moving” (Denton 2016b, 227) The best way for writers to do so would be transforming

themselves by living in the countryside (Judd 1985, 384), living like peasants, and learning to think like them, because that is where revolution originates.

The Talks have set the national cultural policy after the foundation of PRC since 1949. The CCP started imposing its dictates to ensure literary uniformity both in institutions and cultural campaigns, eliminating the pluralism of the Republican period (Denton 2016a, 13-14).

Periodic campaigns aiming to break down writers' autonomy and determine the extent of their intellectual freedom were carried out throughout the years: the process to Hu Feng 胡风 (1955), the Hundred Flowers Movement (1956-1957), the much more extreme Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) among the others. Every Chinese literary product was subject to a heavy prepublication censorship which became the norm, and writers have learnt to cope with it and handle the fast-changing official views of what is allowed to be written (Hockx 2016, 50-53). Censorship has gradually softened since the post Maoist era, especially more recently with the emergence of online publications, but writers are still under constant control (53). According to Link, this softening of censorship will soon come to an end: cyber versions of Cultural Revolution "struggle sessions" have already appeared, so that a return of it, adapted to the new era, is possible (2021).

As shown by the historical events of the PRC outlined above, different specific socio-political facts (like CCP's governance of China) and specific ideologies (like contemporary socialism with Chinese characteristics) may shape the literary development of a country. The monolithic voice and extreme intolerance (Zhang 2016, 27-28) that historically marked PRC's cultural policy, as previously stated, decreased in recent times, partly because of the censorship that writers self-imposed simply avoiding topics considered problematic in that period, and partly because of the greater freedom literature has had since the end of the Cultural Revolution (Hockx 2016, 53).

Over the years, the CCP has re-oriented its message to make it culturally congruent with its principal target audience (Perry 2017, 29): the people. In fact, keeping pace with the times is one of the main messages that Xi expressed during his speech at the 11th Congress of FLAC and 10th Congress of CWA. Here, Xi underlined that over the past century "the Party has led the literary and art front to blaze a path of development guided by Marxism, suited to China's national conditions and cultural traditions, and holds high the people-centered nature" (Xinhua 2021). Xi also said that this first communist century built a new national, scientific, and popular culture in the country, and promoted a prosperous development of literature and art. To strengthen this concept, Xi quoted Mao, stating that "the Party's aim is the construction of a new culture for the Chinese nation" (Xi 2021). Mao's words bind the past of CCP to what it is today, showing the stability and continuity of the way that the country has been paving. Under the guidance of CCP, writers have kept pace with the times, inspired the masses, and committed themselves to the cause of revolution, construction, and reform

(Xi 2021). As Hockx writes, this shows how Chinese literature strongly depends on political development and orientates over time based on the Party's ideological impositions (50).

Xi's words represent writers as a living part of CCP, taking care of the people under the caring guide of Marxism. Here, Marxism and Socialism are presented as part of China's cultural tradition and as a fundamental condition for its bright future (Xi 2021). This is a big responsibility for writers, who are called to adjust their art to the era in which they live, extract their subjects from the changes of the times, show the beauty of Chinese history, express the will of the Chinese people's struggle, and present the spirit of the new era in a comprehensive and panoramic way. The aesthetic function of literature in Yan'an was sacrificed for the benefit of the realist representation of reality (Hockx 2016, 51), but writers today are still asked to write about and for people, including their tireless struggle in the storytelling of Chinese greatness.

First: Education

All five points of the speech start with the verb "hope". In fact, Xi's speech, on first reading, looks more like a request to artists and writers to follow the ideals of the Party, rather than an obligation. As Tsai explains, this is part of a clever combination of coercion, censorship, and conciliation (quoted in Perry 2017, 29), which is an important element at the base of the power of CCP today. PRC leans heavily upon cultural governance as an instrument of political authority in underscoring the distinctive Chinese character of its political system (30).

Xi hopes that writers will portray the magnificent atmosphere of Chinese new era's journey (Xi 2021) and educate people with their art about the greatness of Communist China. Link points out that one way to measure China's urge to transform itself is to note how often the word "new" is used by Chinese leaders: 1949's "New China", Cultural Revolution's "new socialist man", post-Mao as the "new period", and most importantly for this research, today's "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era". As I will discuss in the last paragraph, Van Creveld points out that this interestingly echoes with "New Workers" (2022, 13) as I will discuss in the third paragraph. However, it is important to note that each is a new "new" (Link 2021) and therefore keeps pace with times. Art that does not align to the Party's principles or to the essence of the "new", and art that meets the expectations from "above" is expected to shape and educate the society. Therefore, the role of writers is a link between the CCP "above" and the people "below".

Xi talked about the importance of a firm confidence in socialism with Chinese characteristics, which is fundamental for the creation of outstanding works of art with distinctive national characteristics and personality (Xi 2021). Socialism necessarily becomes a part of Chinese cultural tradition, so that artistic productions are a spiritual force that inspires people and the nation. Xi also

highlighted the importance of preserving the stance of Chinese culture and establishing a distinctive Chinese style in world literature and art (Xinhua 2021). This is a process of making the communist system appear more Chinese (Perry 2017, 33) and gain cultural governance, which serves to strengthen regime legitimacy. In fact, in the absence of democratic institutions, leaders find cultural and historical assertions of value in staking a claim to legitimacy (30). In fact, Xi quoted the Tang poet Li Han 李汉, stating that “literature is an instrument to spread the truth” (Xi 2021).

Second: Celebration

As Elizabeth Perry stresses, CCP today explicitly places a high value on cultural governance, for nationalistic purpose (30). Xi dedicates the second “hope” to the celebration of the masses and their heroic deeds by artists, and to their ideological alignment to people.

According to Xi, socialist literature and art have to originate from the people, be for the people and belong to the people. People are creators of history and time; they are the history of the nation itself. People are an abundant source of art, and art enhances the deeds of people while making their history (Xi, 2021). Xi is not far from Yan’an dictates when he states that “only if artists and writers go deep into the masses, understand the roughness of their efforts and feel their multiple emotions [...], can they finally create art with deep power and timeless fascination” (Xi, 2021). In fact, in terms of literary production, the prescribed models in Yan’an were socialist realism and “revolutionary realism combined with revolutionary romanticism” (Denton 2016a, 14). For this reason, a strong spirit of realism and romanticism is still necessary to describe the lives of the masses and their emotions. Both realistic and romantic links between artists and people have made people’s life a living drama which artists must transform into eternal masterpieces.

Third: Innovation

Xi’s speech has a strong innovative intent. It stresses the necessity for writers to keep up with China’s innovation and development, so that through art China will show the world what Chinese people have achieved in cultural innovation and creation. (Xi 2016, 2021). But this is not an easy task, as contemporary China is developing incredibly fast, and art has to follow up science and technology. For this reason, there are some necessary contrasts to Mao’s day. To him, propaganda was meant to move masses to revolution; today the aim is to soften any protest to stabilize party rule (Perry 2017, 41). But still, the revolutionary past of CCP continues to be transmitted and to influence contemporary policies. (42). Xi wants to remind to the people that Chinese traditional (and also socialist) culture has to be transmitted in time and space and also overcome the geographical and cultural borders of China (Xi 2021). Innovative cultural production is a Chinese-made product just like high-tech

computer components and software, and it is supposed to travel along its own “cultural silk road”. To do so, Chinese ancient culture has to be elaborated and harmonised to contemporary Chinese culture and society, because innovation brings self-improvement and inspiration (Xi, 2016).

Finally, Xi declares that to innovate, writers must not imitate their predecessors, but respect and surpass them, in order to move towards a broader creative world (Xi, 2021). Quoting Xi at the 11th Conference of FLAC: “we cannot be innovative if we cut off the bloodline and create something out of nothing. We must [...] learn from the past rather than stubbornly copying it, [...] and let the excellent Chinese traditional culture become an important source of innovation in literature and art.

Fourth: Going Global

The CCP is aware of the importance of the core value of culture in soft power (Glaser and Murphy 2009, 15), so in recent history it worked on the extreme development of social stability, increased its soft power, and paved the way towards a more and more defined Socialism with Chinese characteristics. In this context, the role of literature was crucial. As a world power, China is often subject of international discussion, so the literature it produces is a powerful instrument to spread its success and stability (Xi 2021). Internationally, culture is a serious matter of competition, and since Deng’s Opening up reforms in 1978, the country has worked hard to raise Chinese soft power (Glaser and Murphy 2009, 15) – and the results are impressive. For this reason, Xi exhorts artists to be ambitious and create works that highlight China’s aesthetic interest, and to spread contemporary Chinese values that reflect those of humanity (Xi 2021).

In 2006, Hu Jintao declared that there is a strong connection between national cultural development and success in international competition (quoted in Glaser and Murphy 2009). In fact, recognising that soft power - whose core value is culture - is fundamental to achieve national power, has led to increase government funding to expand cultural soft-power resources overseas (16), like Confucius Institutes. Nationalised artistic content is fundamental, because it inherits and carries forward the national identity and establishes a distinctly Chinese style in the world of literature (Xi 2021). CCP’s aim is the creation of globally recognizable cultural images that can help present a multi-dimensional China to the world (Xinhua 2021).

Fifth: Beauty

Xi talks about the importance of beauty and virtue in art, whose role is shaping the heart of the people, but first the one of artists (Xi 2016). He pushes writers to abandon vulgarity and hedonism, which was sometimes used to attract consumers in the new cultural market (Kraus 2004, 190). The corrupt idea of money-worship has to be erased, because the creative process of literature cannot be falsified

(Xi 2016, 2021). But in China, judging beauty is not an easy task as it used to be, it is not priceless (Kraus 2004, 183-92) and it is strongly linked to censorship. Hence, the pursuit of beauty in literature takes on a social responsibility and becomes a demonstration of morality and faith towards the CCP (Xi 2016). Art and literature take on the responsibility of becoming culture and transforming people (Xi 2021). Xi strongly condemns what he calls the immoral use of literature and celebrates the beauty of virtuous pieces of art.

In conclusion, in Xi's view, good socialist artists must learn to refuse momentary profit and avoid being slaves of the market, because the most important thing is not individuality but society (Kraus 2004, 190-6).

CCP's Cultural Policy in a Nutshell

The analysis of Xi Jinping's speech in this first chapter can be summarised following the five above mentioned five key words. Therefore, according to Xi and CCP cultural policy, artistic and literary production in 2021 China has to be educational, celebratory, innovative, transnational and beautiful.

In the following chapters, the CCP's cultural policy will be the contextualisation of migrant workers' professional and cultural activity.

Chapter Two: Literature from ‘Below’ – How it Originates, What it Expresses, How it Works

We now turn to the phenomenon of migrant workers’ literary productions – in our case specifically poetry – in social, historical, and political terms. This chapter contains an analysis of the conditions under which *dagong* 打工 – in English migrant workers operate, their socioeconomic position, and the motivations behind their literary productions. The sociological-literary part is the core of this chapter and includes an analysis of some contextualised examples of *dagong shige* 打工诗歌 – battler poetry.

The main purpose of this second chapter is showing how migrant workers and their literary production deal with CCP’s dictates on cultural policy, to what extent they adapt to it, and how they manage to deviate from it.

Migrant Workers and Subalternity: a Sociological-Political Analysis

Labor migration is a common social phenomenon in the world. China is no exception, and its stream of internal migrant workers going from poor rural areas to cities in desperate search of a job is a big social issue (Xu and Jordan 2016, 3), counting 376 million people in 2020. The major hubs of interprovincial migrations are the Guangdong province (especially Guangzhou and Shenzhen), Shanghai and Beijing, where migrants constitute half population of these cities (National Bureau of Statistics 2021). It is a reason for China’s growth as a global player in manufacturing because of these urban laborers’ low-cost, which makes Chinese products very competitive. Doing low-status work without any control on their own destiny under a socio-economic point of view makes these people “the foot soldiers of China’s economic rise but not invariably their beneficiaries” (Van Crevel 2021b, 165). This phenomenon is inevitably connected to some big social issues, and despite the advantages for the country in an international commercial perspective, these Chinese “battlers” encounter huge obstacles towards the achievement of a fair and dignified social status (Chan K.W. 2021, 6).

Hukou: First and Second-Class Citizens

One of these issues is the hukou 户口 system, a good case of the welfare boundary at the local level (Ma and Wu 2016, 131) which unequally splits society in two parts: insiders and outsiders (Xu and Jordan 2016, 17). It is a residence certification system created in 1958 that distinguishes rural from urban workers. It monitors population flows and ties people to their place of origin not allowing them

to benefit from the most basic social rights when they are far from home. Since many social services are financed locally, it sets different rights for citizens from different areas. For example, people who move from the countryside to the city may not be entitled to health care and education (17-8). Although the hukou was established in the Maoist period, it still exists despite a strong opposition. However, it is impossible to abolish while keeping the social welfare system static, because it is closely linked to it, besides having a fundamental population management role which is crucial for Chinese authorities. (Ma and Wu 2016, 128). Since 1978, however, the economic and Opening-up reforms have caused the above-mentioned massive migration which forced the State Council to admit the right of migration and theoretically soften the strict hukou control, granting a temporary residence permit – in Chinese *zan zhuzheng* 暂住证 – to migrant workers. This gives them more freedom about living in medium-sized cities, but still prevents them from settling in the biggest urban areas permanently (127). The government took lots of initiatives to reduce the percentage of migrants without local hukou, especially in 2014, when it tried to decrease the number of benefits that migrants could not access (Chan K.W. 2021, 6). However, the lockdown restrictions during the COVID19 pandemic demonstrated that the gap between locals and migrants is still huge (4) and the government must find a solution to prevent floating population from harming national growth and convert it into a new source for the Chinese economy (6).

A Victim “from Below”: the Migrant Worker Sun Zhigang 孙志刚

A tangible example of what has been said so far about the hukou system is the story of Sun Zhigang, which I believe will be useful for the purposes of my argument. In fact, it illustrates the brutal reality in which any of the previously described “second-class” citizens could easily find themselves in. Taken as an example, this story highlights – although in an extreme way – the condition of heavy subalternity and powerlessness that these people can experience on a daily basis, not by their own choice, but in a desperate attempt to find a better future for themselves and their families.

In the middle of March 2003, a 27-year-old migrant worker from Hubei was arrested in Guangzhou on suspicion of illegal immigration. As he had no identity documents with him and had not yet obtained his temporary residence permit, he could not defend himself against the charges. He died under mysterious circumstances after three days of detention in the Guangzhou Custody and Repatriation (C&R) centre. Sun Zhigang, this was his name, worked for Daqi Garment Company and was one of many migrant workers who still leave their families in search of a job. Initially, Sun’s death was attributed to a heart attack, but his family was never allowed to see his body. As a result of a donation by Sun's former university colleagues and common people interested in the truth, his family was able to afford medical-legal expertise to investigate the reasons for his death. The autopsy

showed that Sun had died from injuries caused by blunt trauma, showing that he was beaten to death by some employees of the centre (Hand 2009, 223). The news of the real reasons for Sun's death spread, leading those responsible to legally pay for their deed (China.org.cn 2022).

The C&R was a controversial detention system that public security offices employed to enforce China's residency registration system and to monitor domestic migration from the countryside to cities (Hand 2009, 223). Although C&Rs were only meant to detain beggars or indigents before repatriation, they were actually used to manipulate the migration flow and expel unwanted individuals through corruption and extortion (222). Sun Zhigang's incident set an important precedent that led to the abolition of C&R in June 2003. New service stations were established under the new "Measures for Assisting Vagrants and Beggars with No Means of Support in Cities" (Human Rights Watch, 2008). However, the hukou system remained alarmingly unchanged.

Left-Behind Children

Another prominent issue is connected to women's migration, whose biggest concern is the negative impact on children wellbeing. These children are victims of a social plague that, given the slow progress just mentioned, shows no sign of abating. Due to hukou-related problems, migrant children are often unable to enrol in school, and have to return to their place of origin, or not follow their mother at all (Chan K.W. 2021, 5). At home, most of the times in the most backward rural regions of China, their grandparents usually take care of them. This condition, referred to as "left-behind children" – *liushou ertong* 留守儿童 – is widespread in today's China, as it affects 69 million children, about a third of the children living in the countryside (UNICEF Annual Report 2018). Parental distance causes serious developmental, behavioural and educational problems to the children, which can bring bad consequences to the family like internal conflicts, as evidenced in Fa Lixin's 2009 film "Last Train Home". In the worst cases, statistics report an alarming rate of child suicide (Xu and Jordan 2016, 13-4). Such situations make the condition of migrant workers even more precarious.

Working and Living Conditions

Migrant workers are subjected to a great deal of exploitation. They may work 10-12 hours a day, 6-7 days a week and do the most physically demanding jobs that locals normally refuse, like working in manufacturing employment or construction industry. Due to low education and no awareness of their social rights, they are exploited and paid very low wage (Wong et al. 2008, 483-4). One must consider that agglomeration means benefits, and the biggest cities offer every kind of job – whether skilled or uneducated – and therefore reduce rural poverty (Chan K.W. 2021, 5) but because of the mentioned hukou system, most migrants (around 90%) are excluded from social welfare benefits like social

security, health service and pension plans (Wong et al. 2008, 484). Hukou system does not even allow to get rental facilities, and because of the lack of accommodation and subsequent prohibitively high rental fees, migrant workers have no choice but live in dormitories provided by their employers, whose sanitary conditions are far below acceptable (485). Moreover, local people often accuse migrant workers of stealing jobs and see them as a threat for social stability and unemployed locals, blaming them for crime rate increase.

These precarious situations, in addition to migration stress, language barrier and uncertainty about the future, lead a very high percentage of migrant workers to suffer from mental diseases, depression and a variety of social disorders, especially among the youngest (484).

Migrant Workers and Subaltern Cultural Production: a Sociological-Literary Analysis

It is at this point in the chapter that the main theme takes over: the literary phenomenon known as *dagong shige* 打工诗歌, literally translated by “the poetry of working for the boss” and generally referred to in English as “battler poetry”, from the term *dagong wenxue* 打工文学, “battler literature” (Van Crevel 2021a, 3). This literary genre, which is not particularly widespread but enough to be considered as a genre, is as precarious as its authors. It is precarious poetry (Van Crevel 2021b, 166) and originates from some of the migrant workers whose vicissitudes were analysed in the paragraphs above.

Genesis of a Common Need

The precariousness in which migrant workers are forced to stay just to make a living is undoubtedly the greatest challenge they face on a daily basis. A challenge that not everyone succeeds. There are cases of suicide, some of those little known, silent, and unspoken, fuelling the tragic trend of work and unhappiness related deaths. Others, such as the case of young migrant worker and poet Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990-2014), are veritable screams of protest. He was a worker at Shenzhen’s Foxconn, victim of its despotic system and its tough labour conditions. His poems were published after his death at the age of twenty-four, making him one of the strongest voices of this movement and one of those who managed to express their sorrow and anxieties through artistic production (Nào blog. 2014).

The terrible living conditions that these migrant workers experience and the deprivation of the most common civil rights provide fertile ground for the creation of artistic works, especially poetry, the type of production here analysed. I believe that these works act as a liberating scream but also as a new channel for denouncing a low key reality that transposed onto paper powerfully reveals the social, psychological and emotional condition of an otherwise mute class of workers. As I stated at the very beginning of this thesis, literature is a powerful tool to express people’s most intimate needs

and thoughts. In fact, as Thelle states, every form of art has a deeper purpose than entertainment: “Art is a weapon, reflecting lives, views and resistance that give people strength” (2013, 367). Raising their voice helps workers to be stronger and defend themselves from the passivity of their working life, where they are not able to control their own destiny. Cultural production makes them active, frontline battlers for their freedom and for the dignity of their work (367-8). This allows the reader to take an introspective journey into an otherwise inaccessible world, because the point of view is that of the protagonists of these vicissitudes. It is a sincere point of view, which arises from the need to write about themselves and for themselves before writing for others (Van Crevel 2021b, 172). Its interpreters stand together, are tied together, intertwined like a solidarity chain, and the contents they express are much more important than the identity of the poet who put them into verse.

The Concept of Chinese New Worker

When migrant workers leave, they cause a profound change in the system they leave behind, which is the countryside, because they take their labour away from the fields and the family order. At the same time, their presence in the city, as already mentioned, is often frowned upon (Van Crevel 2019, 138). This uprooting from home and at the same time alienation in the new reality is one of the reasons that lead some of them to write, regardless of who they write for (themselves?) and the quality of their writing (is it really poetry?).

Today, there are NGOs who stand to protect migrant workers’ rights. This means not only helping them to solve the problems I previously discussed, but also strengthening self-esteem and rebuilding their lost identity, as well as simply letting them live a good life. The main result of involving migrant workers in these collective projects is giving them back their dignity, so that they perceive this as their new house and new family, as a place of salvation through literary production, but also social identification and newfound self-esteem (Van Crevel 2022, 9). Using the terminology from the Picun Migrant Workers Home, this process transforms *gongren* 工人 into *xin gongren* 新工人 – New Workers –, showing new awareness of their unique role in the country’s growth, making them a group that shares the same ambitions (Van Crevel 2019, 129-30). The above-mentioned intertwined chain follows the Maoist respect for labour and mutual help (Thelle 2013, 358-9), reflecting in this sense CCP’s ideas about proletarian literature: who better to describe the lives of poor subaltern migrant workers than poor subaltern migrant workers? At the same time, however, battler poetry is a literature of complaint and emancipation, and for this reason subject to censorship and to the CCP’s cultural policy dictates discussed in the first chapter.

Picun: Beating Heart of Subaltern Cultural Production

The earliest case of “literary community” for migrant workers came with the spread of Internet in China around the year 2000. The advent of smartphones has then greatly simplified the circulation of these works, making them accessible to anyone, in real time, even in the absence of a fixed residence. They started writing blogs, sharing works on social medias with a certain amount of freedom from censorship, because those were unofficial publications. Social media have thus become the best vehicle for the circulation and reception of migrant workers poetry (Van Crevel 2021b, 174-5). For this reason, and for a sense of membership that connects migrant workers to each other, every group of workers is not isolated, but connected with other labour groups throughout mainland China (Qiu and Wang 2018, 146).

In terms of physical communities, one of the most noteworthy is the village of Picun, in the industrial district of Chaoyang in north-eastern Beijing, more than 50 kilometres far from the centre (Qiu and Wang 2018, 130). This is how poet Xiao Hai described it when he visited for the first time in 2016 (大国小民 2017):

Picun is a typical urban village with dust blowing in high winds. Grocery shops, small restaurants and roadside vendors weave the village into a web of thousands of workers hunting busily for their meals.¹

Picun is home for approximately 20000 migrant workers who found their job in the area around the village and has been home to the NGO known as Migrant Workers Home since 2002. It was founded by three young migrant workers who were dreaming to become artists. One of those, Sun Heng 孙恒, with a big love for music, set up a school for the children of workers who did not have the right to official education (Chan B. 2014). He is now giving voice to the country’s millions of migrant workers being part of a band called *xin gongren yishu tuan* 新工人艺术团 – New Worker Art Troupe (NWAT) which performs in Picun and whose members live in Picun. The band aims to fight discrimination against “second class citizens” in its songs just like those workers who write poems. The Migrant Workers Home got bigger and bigger, found fundings, and today manages plenty of different cultural activities among workers: festivals, art expositions, theatre plays, and so on. The Migrant Workers Home has now become a culture factory, and following its mission statement, it gives history and a future to them (Van Crevel 2019, 128).

But Picun is not always and only a place of salvation, as migrant worker and poet Xiao Hai described it (Van Crevel 2022, 9). Picun is also a place that may disappoint the expectations of those

¹ My translation.

who leave a small village for metropolitan life, because life in Picun is quite different from dreams of a comfortable life in a “splendid metropolis filled with high-rise buildings and bright neon lights” (Fu 2021). In fact, despite the above-mentioned considerations, in an interview in 2017 Xiao Hai reported: “we always report to our families our happiness, carrying the imaginary and unrealistic expectations of the big city back home. [...] I just need to live, just the normal kind of living” (大国小民 2017). In Picun, people work humbly to survive and sometimes with little success. It is very difficult to afford housing for migrant workers, so that Picun fills up more and more, making living conditions more than challenging. The testimony of the worker Fu Qiuyun, from Henan province, is very touching; she blames the city of Beijing itself for not being grateful for her work, which has contributed to making Beijing the great and rich city it is today. She traces the reason for this to government policy and social discrimination against migrant workers, reminding the Beijing people that their wellbeing is a big debt to her.

New Workers and the Politics of Culture

It is at this point clear that Picun also has a literature group made of working poets and writers: the Picun Literature Group. This group meets to study and make literature with the voluntary contribution of academics and scholars from universities in Beijing who weekly give lectures in Picun. Since its institution in 2014, the group counted about 300 workers (Ma 2021). The works of those who write get officially published in literary journals. Battler literature in general and battler poetry, the focus of my research, is considered historical testimony, a post Mao-era precarious working-class expression embodying the ideals of the low-cost hard worker far from home (Van Crevel 2019, 129).

The sociological phenomenon of migrant workers opens up a much bigger political issue: the fact that these working poets, despite being aware of the very little political relevance they have, are clamouring for collective emancipation through poetry (Pozzana 2019, 189). In fact, despite the fact that Communism has always praised workers, especially the poor and uneducated, the position of these New Workers is extremely precarious and certainly not emancipated. Their weapon, literature, or in this precise context poetry, is handled by them as an intellectual space far away from the dominant government culture (190), but which nevertheless ends up approaching it, in some cases merging with it. However, a fundamental characteristic of battler poetry is its strong collective value, whereby each poet who writes for himself or herself is as if doing so for the entire community of Chinese migrant workers (191-2).

As mentioned briefly above, and as explained clearly by Van Crevel and Thelle, this type of literature is ambivalent towards power. It is a type of literary production that is either born on smartphone screens or written in pen on scraps of paper by assembly line workers during their lunch

break, and in any case almost never born in a laptop comfortably placed on a desk. Its “floating” and highly political nature makes it constantly under the watchful eyes of censorship, especially because of its easy circulation in the social medias. Consequently, the state has to play an ambivalent role towards it, at once supportive, due to its proletarian and in a sense revolutionary nature which easily meets Yan’an support, but also critical, due to its spirit of complaint and emancipation.

A Contextualised Example of Battler Poetry: “The Flower of my Youth”

Below are some excerpts from my translation of the poem *Wode qingchun* 我的青春 (“The flower of my youth”) by the poet and former worker An Zhesi 俺这厮. An was a teacher in schools for children of migrant workers relocated to Beijing, participated in the cultural projects of the Migrant Workers Home and was a member of the Picun Literature Group (Picerni 2020, 162).

I translated this poem in November 2021 as part of my final paper “Exporting Migrant Workers’ Poetry through Translation” from Maghiel van Crevel’s seminar “China’s New Workers and the Politics of Culture”. In this thesis, I only present a few extracts of the translation, whereas the analysis that follows is not part of the earlier work. I have chosen An Zhesi’s poem as an example of battler poetry to conclude this second chapter because I consider it particularly effective in corroborating this sociological and literary analysis. It also helps to link it to my sociological and political analysis in the previous paragraph and demonstrate that the conditions in which migrant workers live, described so far on a theoretical level, can also be found in the verses they write. I believe this poem condenses what has been said so far in a satisfactory manner. At this point of my research, it is possible to see within the verses I selected every aspect of the social, economic and psychological condition of migrant workers, both as individuals and as a human condition concerning a large category of people.

The selected verses are grouped by themes. I believe that this poem is a good demonstration of the encounter of the two vectors (from “above” and from “below”): it contributes to the party’s efforts to maintain a socialist working-class literature based on Yan’an principles, making this type of poetry like a bridge between manual and intellectual labour (Picerni 2022, 7). The poem aligns with the concept of proletarian literature and foregrounds the figure of the lowly worker:

the flower of my youth is a spare part on the assembly line
and assembles me onto this world
the flower of my youth is the long arm up on the crane
and its majesty has overcome my smallness
the flower of my youth is a 800 metres underground tunnel

and after the night shift I climb up to the horizon to watch the sunrise
[...]
the flower of my youth is an ash-coloured work suit
and keeps me safe into this place
the flower of my youth is “SF Express” “STO Express Co”²
and electric tricycles take on the hopes of an entire family

As Iovene and Picerni have well pointed out, the representation of the assembly line is frequently recurring in migrant literature in general, because it well defines the image of repetitiveness in workers’ consuming work, as well as in their lives. To give another example, Xu Lizhi compares the assembly line workers to the soldiers of the terracotta army in the mausoleum of Qinshi Huangdi, calling each of the workers by name in order to save them from anonymity and dehumanisation in his verses (14). I refer the continuation of this argument, which will be better contextualised by the case study on Xiao Hai, to chapter three.

Xu Lizhi himself is a reference in this poem and represents a poetic tradition that originates from excessively oppressive working conditions that generate, as mentioned, a sense of belonging to a group, where the one’s sorrow is everyone’s sorrow (Picerni 2020, 162). In pair with Sun Zhigang, the two martyrs of this invisible world take on a voice and become a strong symbol of protest against the everyday life of these people, creating the counterpoint “from below” to what has just been said. Both tragedies are linked to the above mentioned and unjust hukou system, showing the strong connection with bureaucracy and its management by the government (Picerni 2020, 163).

the flower of my youth has smeared with the blood of Sun Zhigang
that vitally important “temporary residence permit”
the flower of my youth is in Xu Lizhi’s verses
“that moon made of iron” he swallowed³

The poem maintains its tone of complaint by highlighting various issues of migrant labour, such as homesickness and uprooting, which are consequences of the social issues presented at the beginning of this chapter, in the sense of big distance from home and from one’s living habits, and the feeling of being imprisoned in an unfamiliar and hostile place with no chance of leaving. Dealing with the author’s nostalgia (these poems are usually autobiographical) for his rural home and happy past

² Delivery services in Shenzhen and Shanghai.

³ This is a reference to Xu Lizhi’s poem “我咽下一枚铁做的月亮” (“I swallowed an iron moon”), referring to the bad conditions of factory workers.

memories is a recurrent topic (Picerni 2020, 155). The poem ends exhorting not to abandon the dignity that characterises human beings, despite the blood shed by the victims of this condition.

the flower of my youth is a long-distance train ticket
and carries verses and remote places I search for
[...]
the flower of my youth is a bottle of “Niuer”⁴
and in my drunk dreams it’s like hearing my mum shouting at me to come home
[...]
the flower of my youth is concrete + rebar
and has buried my shadow deep into this city
the flower of my youth is blooming petals
and feeds with boiling blood this era
the flower of my youth is an excited flame
and will never abandon the “dignity” that makes a being human!
today I fold a bunch of chrysanthemums
To pay tribute to the flower of my youth!

In a nutshell, these lines – and battler poetry as a genre whose representatives are part of a community based on the similarity of their living conditions – turn out to be the result of the collectivisation of the social tragedy of subaltern and underpaid labour.

⁴ 牛二 Niuer is a rice liquor typical of the southern part of China.

Chapter Three: Case study – Xiao Hai at the Intersection of the Vectors from Below and Above

This chapter will be the meeting point between the first and the second. After an introduction on the figure of the poet Xiao Hai and an analysis of his character as a migrant worker, as a poet and as a literary phenomenon, the chapter will be structured as follows. The first, more general part will address the issue of Xiao Hai's battler poetry: from a political point of view – “from above” –, analysing how Xiao Hai aligns with the CCP cultural policy and Xi's talks on literature, and from a migrant worker's point of view – “from below”. The second part of the chapter, instead, will study the issue through an analysis of a selection of Xiao Hai's poems that I consider the most illustrative.

The Migrant Worker and Migrant Poet Xiao Hai

I wish I could sleep peacefully in the cradle of 5000 years of culture, but the sound of reality's bells ferociously crushed my peace and tiredness like a road roller.⁵

The sentence above is Xiao Hai's Weibo profile biography (2022) and I think it condenses in one line his nature, his dreams and the life that fate and necessities have chosen for him to live. His Weibo profile is not widely popular, although Xiao Hai frequently posts his poems and videos of different kinds: some are about nature, like flowers and insects; others are shot inside Picun and are excellent accounts of workers' life inside the urban village (Weibo.com 2022). In an interesting interview he has delivered for Chinese channel CCTV News in 2017 (大国小民 2017), Hu Liushuai 胡留帅 – known in Picun as Xiao Hai because of his love for the Chinese contemporary poet Hai Zi 海子 – tells he was born in 1987 and is the third of four siblings of an extremely poor family in rural Henan. Since his parents could not afford to educate them all, in 2003 he decided to start working instead of going to high school, so he moved to Shenzhen at the age of sixteen. He experienced gruelling working conditions and night shifts in several factories, working 10 hours a day and 30 days a month at dozen of assembly lines spread all over the Pearl River delta. One day, he went out after a night shift to buy breakfast and was arrested because he did not have his residence permit with him. Xiao Hai was rather lucky as he managed to escape from the police station in a moment of distraction of the guards. In the years that followed, he changed jobs dozens of times, always working on the assembly line of different factories. The conditions in which he worked were still terrible, as were the

⁵ My translation.

dormitories in which he slept. Sometimes, when his workday was less busy, he had time to write some verses on the back of leaflets he found at his workplace, secretly from his boss, who punished him when he found out. His instinctual love for writing led him to buy a dictionary that he read over and over again, developing the ambition to one day write a great literary work “to astonish the world” (Van Crevel 2022, 5). At a university market in Suzhou in 2012, he bought a very old book of poems by Hai Zi for five yuan, which he never parted with. As time went by, his love for writing became more and more conscious and his writing also became more and more intense. He wrote more than one hundred poems in free verse while working on the assembly line on the back of worksheets, purchase and sales orders. Then, in the evening, from an internet café, he used to copy them down and upload them to Qzone⁶ so that they would not be lost.

Xiao Hai’s need to write alienated him from his work colleagues, who could not understand what the point of writing poetry was and what benefit it had for assembly line workers. However, he made writing poetry his major outlet between his endless days spent on the assembly line. He just wanted to “write about his wandering life of survival, as one of the other 300 million workers”. About his need to write, he declared:

Sometimes I hate myself for this, but I don't know how to compromise in the face of fate. Perhaps it is just a record of an ordinary worker's sorrow, happiness, bitterness and youthful elegy. All these years I have nothing but broken poems⁷. (大国小民 2017)

Through his publications on Weibo on which he commented on rock singers, copied his poems or simply talked about himself, Xiao Hai got in touch with the singer Zhang Chu 张楚, who introduced him to Xu Duo 许多, a founding member the New Workers’ Art Troupe in Picun, and then to his members (Van Crevel 2022, 3). He started to exchange poems with them and in 2016 he took the decision to leave his job and fly to Beijing to reach Picun following Xu Duo’s suggestion. There, he visited the Workers’ Museum, which deeply impressed by: he saw “the equality and dignity of being alive”.

While in Beijing, Xiao Hai changed several jobs in really short time because he needed to finance his trip and slept outdoors to save money. In his own words, quitting his previous job to join Picun made him a real *beipiao* 北漂⁸, being entirely in line with the lifestyle of other migrant workers. One day, in Picun, he attended a meeting of the Literature Group and chose to become a member.

⁶ A Chinese social network created by Tencent Holdings in 2005.

⁷ My translation.

⁸ A non-Beijinger who moves to Beijing seeking success or financial stability.

Since that day, Xiao Hai has developed a strong sense of belonging to Picun and the kind of life that is led there. However, about his personal life, he feels he has no more aspirations, because they have been taken away from him by the mechanical job he has been doing for years. His greatest wish would be to achieve what he has never succeeded in: finding someone to start a family with and enjoy his youth that working at the assembly line prevented him from enjoying (大国小民 2017). Poetry, as Xiao Hai himself recalls, “saved and soothed his heart” (Ma 2021).

I feel like a contradictory, sharp and decadent old young man, the product of the assembly line. Today I have no house or car, no savings or wife. But luckily, I can write poems.⁹ (大国小民 2017)

Genesis of a Personal Need

In a second more intimate interview published by Sixth Tone¹⁰ edited by Ma Junyuan in 2021, Xiao Hai explains that for him, on the one hand, writing poetry turned out to be the only way out from the automaticity of his alienating job. On the other hand, it became a natural process to express the freedom that the factory took away from him. His main inspirations have been the poet Hai Zi, who was very popular among young Chinese people and instilled spiritual strength in him, Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan. From them, he took the bravery and recklessness which let him express his innermost feelings while chained to the assembly line. When he started writing, he did it only for himself and had no other readers. Poetry – together with rock music, his second passion – was a strong personal need: writing about the anguish of factory life healed his soul and made it feel free. In his own words, literature and music are both ways to relieve loneliness, and thanks to them, he reached Picun and joined its Literature Group. There, he found people like him, with the same conception of life, who encouraged him to feel part of that world. To him, Picun is a spiritual island isolated from the city, the place his restless soul had been looking for long time (Ma 2021).

Before arriving in Picun, Xiao Hai had to face what Van Crevel calls the “Battler’s Conceal” (2022, 4), which is the path that formed him and then led him to the urban village in Beijing. A path – a “coming-of-age story”, as Van Crevel remarks – started at an early age, as mentioned, and made up of many different jobs united by alienation from the “smoke and fires of the real world” (Ma 2021). As in a self-made Bildungsroman, Xiao Hai learned his way through a life of loneliness, helplessness and disorientation, learning barely anything and with no specific job skills, at the very base of a system he knew he did not want to belong to. For Xiao Hai, writing is therapeutic, and at the same time an instrument in the search for justice, both individual and collective, because it aims to restore

⁹ My translation.

¹⁰ An online publication that produces content on contemporary China.

dignity and time to those who have lost them through a life spent working to survive in inhuman conditions (Van Crevel 2022, 6).

Since Xiao Hai has moved to Picun in 2016 he rapidly became something like a celebrity. Most importantly, he managed to represent the needs and feelings of a social class, an entire and large group of workers – the battlers – that share the same bitter and edgy view of existence, which cannot be sweetened other than starting to perceive the individual self as part of a family, to share the harshness of life and make it acceptable through literary expression (Van Crevel 2022, 3-4). Thus, writing for oneself becomes writing for “all of us”.

Xiao Hai as the Junction Point between the Vectors “from Above” and “from Below”

The Picun Literature Group, besides being a group of fellow workers and friends who share the same lifestyle, also embodies the resistance of Chinese migrant workers who have been downgraded from proletariat to precariat in recent decades under the shadow of the Chinese Dream (Van Crevel 2022, 13). Nevertheless, as Fu Qiuyun has already emphasised forcefully, it is these workers who are the most active part of the transformation of the Chinese nation – most of the times unintentionally – but they are not given this merit (2021). The battlers are “the screw in the revolutionary machine” (Van Crevel 2022, 10-2), a socialist metaphor for smallness but great utility to the collective good, albeit unwittingly¹¹. At the same time, however, this subaltern and precarious condition of the battlers, their stoicism and heroic perseverance puts them perfectly in line with the concept of the socialist and revolutionary worker perpetrated by the government through the myth of *Zhongguo meng* 中国梦 – the Chinese Dream – which is Xi Jinping’s political aspiration to an overall national rejuvenation and a better future for “China’s peaceful rise” (Hughes 2010). It is important to remark that one of Picun Migrant Workers House’s mottos is *laodong zui guangrong* 劳动最光荣 – “Labour is glorious” (24). Thus, while migrant workers oppose the system within which they work and survive in the conditions discussed above, it is the system itself that needs them, includes them and cherishes their figure. The emergence of urban villages, including Picun and all the initiatives it proposes, is nothing but a consequence of their ambivalent status (13).

This ambivalence just described is precisely the meeting point between the two vectors, here in the order “from below” and “from above”, i.e. the overlap between the personal need to write for the battlers and the function they play in the process of transformation of China into a prosperous and advanced nation, keeping in mind Yan’an’s dictates. Within this discourse, Xiao Hai is not only an individual worker – writing for himself, to cure himself from the anxieties of the migrant worker life

¹¹ In fact, the screw is a recurring theme in battler poetry, as well as the assembly line (Iovene and Picerni 2022, 14).

– but also the spokesman of a collectivity. This collectivity is also highlighted by the Picun slogan *tianxia dagong shi yi jia* 天下打工是一家 – “Migrant workers under the sky are one family” (24). As a public figure in Picun, he perfectly embodies the genre of battler poetry (22). In this dual context, Xiao Hai’s role has become matching the New Workers and the “New Era” from the Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, which is the government’s ideological line in recent years (13). It should not be forgotten that in 2019, Xiao Hai, as a prominent member of the Picun Literature Group, was invited to participate to a poetry composition course at the Beijing Lao She Institute of Literature (Van Crevel 2021b, 175-6). This invitation is proof of the respect and appreciation Xiao Hai has earned in the eyes of the institutions directly sponsored by the government. Obviously, Xiao Hai’s position is an exception in the landscape of migrant workers, but this exceptional position is only the result of his attachment to literature, and even more so to the reasons why he decided to write literature. The relationship between Xiao Hai and the government institutions is the personification of the relationship between battler poetry and the concept of socialist literature outlined by the CCP: a relationship born out of a convergence of needs, one coming from the grassroots of factory labour, the other coming from the upper echelons of the propaganda institutions, both modelled on the resilient workers who make their own sweat a source of glory and belonging to the great Chinese nation.

The definition of the New Worker, born within the Migrant Workers House in Picun, gives a precise role to migrant workers, placing them within the system where, as we have seen, they play the important role of many small screws that are only apparently negligible. This also fits well with the battle of social resistance against the government’s socio-economic policy since the opening reforms of the early 1980s (Van Crevel 2022, 13). In conclusion, we can say that the New Workers have defined themselves as such because of the role they have given themselves, but at the same time they are what they are precisely because of the social, economic and political situation they are rebelling against.

Xiao Hai’s Poetry and CCP’s Dictates: an Analysis Attempt

In the final part of this third chapter, I will analyse a selection of Xiao Hai’s poems, having placed the author in the context outlined above. I will attempt to define the extent to which the proposed works can be considered aligned with Xi Jinping’s discourses on literature, or the extent to which they can be seen as diverging from these. I will attempt to classify the poems by themes, following the key words I used in the first chapter as closely as possible. Each paragraph will contain a poem (and/or a few relevant lines). In this way, I will analyse its alignment with or divergence from the vision expressed in Xi’s speech. Most of Xiao Hai’s poems have not been translated into English

(probably none into Italian), so I will offer my own translation if there is no other. The original version of the poems I translate are taken from Xiao Hai's "The Factory Howl" (*gongchang de haojiao* 工厂的嚎叫, 2017). This an analysis attempt, and the poems I select do not strictly relate to only one of the keywords.

Education and Innovation

While reading some of the numerous poems written by Xiao Hai, I noticed that many of them show a deep love for China, despite the suffering he experienced growing up in his country. In my opinion, this feeling of attachment to the motherland perfectly fits the thread of Xi's discourse on the "New China" which I discussed in the first chapter (within the paragraphs "Education" and "Innovation"). This needs to be narrated to the public to show New China's greatness. I suppose it is no coincidence that the character *xin* 新 (new) occurs quite frequently, also to express contrasts with the millenary classical Chinese tradition merging with today's workers' hard life, as in these lines from "Wind" (*Feng* 风, 2015)¹²:

*with an eight thousand years old unearthed bone flute
you play the living chapters of a new era
when dignity looks paler than rice
do you also recall the overlord of Western Chu who broke cauldrons and sank boats [to win the battle]
while going along the Golden Road?
while going along the Golden Road?
while going along the Great Wall?
while going along the Great Wall?
pushing away all the winds?
pushing away all the winds?
pushing away all the winds?*

According to my interpretation, in these verses, the poor life of a migrant worker with no dignity is connected to that of the great conqueror Xiang Yu 项羽 (232-202 BC) who rebelled against the Qin 秦 dynasty before the future first emperor of the Han 汉 dynasty defeated him. My claim is that Xiao Hai intends to elevate the figure of the migrant workers, capable of writing history and performing great deeds and able to lead China along the "Golden Road". The words *jinguang dadao* 金光大道

¹² The reference to classical China could also be in the title of this poem, which recalls one of the sections into which the *Shijing* 诗经 (Book of Songs) is divided.

(golden road) today are also used to refer to the bright path of Socialism (*shehuizhuyi de jinguang dadao* 社会主义的金光大道), as in the novel of the same title (“The Golden Road”) by proletarian author Hao Ran 浩然 (1932-2008). This is also a clear reference to the author himself, considered one of the most party-aligned writers, and one of the very few who were allowed to publish works during the Cultural Revolution (Tian 2016).

There are many other poems that follow this trend, glorify labour or describe the extreme “chineseness” of some patriotic scenes, like two lines in “Good Morning China” (*zao'an Zhongguo* 早安 中国, 2012), which are repeated several times along the poem:

good morning China good morning sun in front of Tian'anmen
good morning China good morning doves under the five-star red flag

Celebration and Beauty

I believe that the celebratory component is the most spread throughout Xiao Hai's poems about China. For example, I propose the following translation of the poem “The Long March of Chinese New Workers” (*Zhongguo xingongren de Changzhenglu* 中国新工人的长征路, 2016)

we need a Mao Zedong
we need him to lead us walking
walking that way
walking that way

we do not need a Qin Shi Huang
we do not need the Terracotta Army
and do not even need so much a Great Wall like that
our own destiny our own responsibility

we do not want polluted rivers
do not want distorted souls
we want a life of true happiness through labour
not through machines and prejudice
we want the whole world as one community
we want great harmony in the world we want great harmony in the world

It is not difficult to see how this poem, even on a first reading, is extremely celebratory towards Communist China. In the first stanza, Xiao Hai praises the path taken by Mao, which today's workers are still walking under his guidance, which is the best desirable. In the second stanza, Xiao Hai repudiates Qin Shi Huangdi 秦始皇帝, the first emperor who unified China under the Qin dynasty in 221 BC, and his army of terracotta warriors who still defend his mausoleum today. Even the Great Wall, which he mentioned twice in the poem “Wind” alongside the Golden Road, is considered useless. There is a violent rehashing of the Chinese classical tradition, which is considered not useful for happiness in life. The third and final stanza rails against what is dirty and amoral, before indulging in a strongly socialist and proletarian statement that manual labour is the reason for happiness in life. Great harmony in the world, as one big community, is thus the goal to be achieved through the leadership of the Party embodied by Mao and through hard work. No resentment towards the life of the migrant worker emerges in this poem. On the contrary, this poem fully embraces the celebratory intent that Xi speaks of.

While the poem above is entirely devoted to celebrating the greatness of communist China and to labour, the next poem merges these ideals with its author’s ego. The autobiographical component occurs in many of Xiao Hai’s poems (Van Crevel 2022, 14), and is one of the tools that allow him to speak so closely about the life of the migrant worker. The autobiographical component in “China China” (*Zhongguo Zhongguo* 中国 中国, 2012)’s verses merges romantically with that of beloved Chinese motherland, to the point of confusing reality and romance. However, the effect of Xiao Hai’s personal growth emerges strongly, injecting him with a powerful sense of attachment to China, almost an overlap with it. This fusion of author and homeland celebrates China, labour, and enables all migrant workers to identify with these verses, recreating the “global community” advocated in the previous poem. Here I propose the translation of the first stanza:

<i>I travelled through the Central Plains¹³</i>	<i>I travelled through the West</i>
<i>I travelled through the North</i>	<i>I travelled through the South</i>
<i>all those five thousand years of history have become my blood flowing inside me</i>	
<i>that backbone of the Great Wall has become my body solidifying inside me</i>	
<i>on a road in tatters</i>	<i>we still hold our heads high</i>
<i>on this thorny road</i>	<i>we keep on going</i>
<i>no matter if the road ahead is full of twist and turns</i>	<i>no matter if tomorrow is full of trials and tribulations</i>
<i>we are still stumbling on this land</i>	<i>we are still standing tall and upright on the East</i>

¹³ It commonly refers to the lower and middle reaches of the Yellow River. It is also perceived as the birthplace of the Chinese civilization.

but how can I understand you my China?
but how can I hug you my China?
but how can I hold your gaze my China?
but how can I repay you our China?
China China our China
China China our China

In the first part of the stanza, after passing through and getting to know many places in China – we catch the autobiographical reference to the many different jobs in several cities – the author ends up merging with his homeland. In the second part, we witness the realisation that although Xiao Hai life’s path is long and winding, it is identical to that of other workers. Therefore, “my” (*wode* 我的) becomes “our” (*womende* 我们的), and the total identification of the battlers with China itself is accomplished.

Going Global

I believe that the context in which these poems were written, the message they want to convey, and the social position of the writer are unlikely to make them transcend the cultural and geographical boundaries of the country. The social status of the authors also complicates the picture. On the contrary, this cultural production is addressed to the inside of the country and its social and political issues. However, my claim is that this thesis, together with the other academic research on the subject (whose amount is increasing rapidly), could be a first step towards fulfilling this parameter.

Rebellion and Detachment

Until this point, I have analysed verses by Xiao Hua which – to my surprise – kept very close to the cultural policy and dictates analysed in chapter one. But this is the least “sincere” Xiao Hai and perhaps least appreciated by the community - but that is just my opinion as a foreign reader. The following poem, “We come from the Workshop”, was translated by Lai-Ming (2021). This poem, as well as “Chinese Worker”, which has already been translated by Lai-Ming (2021), Picerni (2021) and Van Crevel (2022), depicts a view of labour that is completely different from that seen in the previous poems. It is a stark, disillusioned and less glorifying view of the figure of the migrant worker. This poem sounds like a protest of the social condition of the battlers, and therefore not very close to the key words I have titled the previous paragraphs with. For this reason, I have added two key words to introduce the analysis of the following poems: rebellion and detachment. Here are some lines from “We come from the Workshop”:

*The blue work clothes are covered in grease
The oily hands smell of rust
In the messy hair hides the light of the cutting machine
I leave the workplace dragging my tired legs
[...]
We come from the workshop, covered in grease
We come from the workshop wearing decaying moonlight
We come from the workshop, our bodies mechanized
Our communal living space is between the workshops
We come from the workshop
We come from the workshop*

*We come from the workshop with strengthened hearts
We come from the workshop with assured and loud steps
We come from the workshop braising in a big river of time
We come from the workshop picking up the glory of the sun*

As a final example related to this theme, I suggest some excerpts of the translation of the poem “Debts” (zhai 债, 2016) quoted in Van Crevel (2021, 141):

*You owe the everyday a happiness
You owe the dusk a dawn
You owe the dream a future
You owe your friend an expectation

You owe freedom your dignity
[...]
You owe your lover an eternity
But it's just that fate owes you fairness.*

At first reading, I thought of attaching the pronoun “you” to China. Although it is more likely that the poem is addressed to the community of migrant workers, who spent their lives working, I think this second reading is also fascinating. The author would blame China for owing a large debt to workers. I think both interpretations are consistent with the meaning of the poem and equally effective. In the last verse, the figure of fate takes over, depriving man (or China, often overlapping for Xiao Hai as

we have seen) of the possibility of choosing for himself. This is vastly different from the line “*our own destiny our own responsibility*” in “The Long March of Chinese New Workers”. In this poem, workers cannot choose for themselves, and there is no possibility of redemption or aspiration.

Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis was to confront subaltern cultural production of Chinese migrant workers and cultural policy under Xi Jinping's administration, in order to research opposition points, on one side, and compatibility and alignment on the other. This research had a special focus on poetry, precisely migrant worker and poet Xiao Hai as a case study, and has been conducted on both primary and secondary sources. The former are Xi Jinping's 2016 and 2021 speeches at the FLAC and CWA, for the cultural policy part, as well as a selection of Xiao Hai's poems for the sociological and literary part – all the primary sources are in Chinese language. The latter is relevant scholarship to contextualise respectively Xi's speeches in relation to today's China, and Xiao Hai's poetic production in relation to the Chinese political situation. The final purpose of this thesis was to answer to the following research question: What can Xiao Hai's poetry tell us about the ways in which subaltern cultural production relates to cultural policy in present-day China?

My first research objective was to analyse today's Chinese cultural policy, after providing a historical contextualisation starting from Yan'an Talks in 1942. For this reason, I divided the themes around which Xi has built his discourse on Chinese cultural policy, and I have summarised them in five key words: Education, Celebration, Innovation, Going Global, and Beauty. My second research objective was to provide a sociological and political analysis of Chinese migrant workers, considering the problems they face in moving to their new workplace and subsequently in their daily lives, including political and bureaucratic vicissitudes such as the hukou system – providing the example of Sun Zhigang – and left-behind children, as well as their working conditions. My third research objective was related to the second: it was a sociological and literary analysis aiming to give a satisfactory definition of the concept of "New Worker" in Picun urban village in Beijing, their role in contemporary China and also the reasons pushing them to write poetry in parallel with their job. To enrich this research objective, I have decided to present a brief analysis of some lines from my translation of the poem "The Flower of my Youth" by An Zhesi. My fourth and last research objective was to use Xiao Hai's case study as a juncture point between Xi's discourse and migrant workers' subaltern cultural production to understand to what extent his poetry aligns to the CCP's ideology or diverges from it.

As regards the answer to my research question, my claim at first was that the alignment of battler poetry with Yan'an's ideologies is only apparent, and derives from the fact that the themes it deals with are necessarily congruent with socialist literature. The vector "from below" – i.e. migrant workers' cultural production – is rather independent from the one "from above" – i.e. CCP's cultural policy. The topics that I analysed, which are precisely those accepted and encouraged by the CCP's

cultural policy, are used in battler poetry as a scapegoat against the guillotine of censorship. For this reason, my first conclusion was that, behind this type of proletarian literature, lies a literature of protest and activism. Migrant workers' poetry wants to demonstrate that humble, backward and rural China – were they usually come from – is still the hidden driving force of the country, which grows and improves because of their contribution, whose merit is not recognised. As the research went on, I was surprised by the fact that many poems by Xiao Hai do not include this activist component; on the contrary, they tend to celebrate and glorify the humility of precarious labour, completely neglecting the negativity of its consequences on the people who work to survive. For this reason, I had to distinguish two different lines in Xiao Hai's poetry: in poems that align with Xi's discourse, work is what glorifies workers because it makes China great, while in poems of protest and activism, work is what glorifies workers and gives them a role in society, but at the same time takes their freedom, dignity, youth and aspirations away. To make this dichotomy in Xiao Hai's poems clearer to the reader, I have reused the keywords that summarise the themes of Xi's discourse; with those I classified the poems that align with the cultural policy and added the keywords "Rebellion" and "Detachment" for the poems that deviate from it. Nevertheless, these two aspects often tend to merge, making a strong distinction almost impossible.

My findings are based on the analysis of Xiao Hai's production, meaning that they relate to his production. It would be interesting to continue analysing other poems by Xiao Hai in order to investigate even more deeply his dual role as a poet who aligns with and diverges from Chinese cultural policy. I defer the continuation of this investigation to future translation and research, which might explore other topics in Xiao Hai's poetry, such as unrequited love and family relationships, or take other authors into account, to make this model applicable to the rest of subaltern cultural production.

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