

# Chinese Rural Migrant Workers (Dagong) Poetry as a Form of Subaltern Self-expression<sup>1</sup>

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The paper surveys thematic and stylistic features of dagong poetry. Dagong is a Cantonese slang word that roughly means “working for the boss” and usually refers to having a temporary low skilled and mostly manual job in a private sector and denotes Chinese rural migrant workers, who move to the cities to make a living, because of a lack of economic opportunities in the countryside. Many Chinese social scholars, such as Lu Xinyu, Pun Ngai and Wanning Sun among others consider rural migrant workers a new Chinese subaltern class.

Dagong poetry is a wide and eclectic literary genre that originated in the late 1980s. It features authentic straightforward and emotionally charged language, brutally painful yet anthropologically precise depiction of grassroots working and living conditions, personal experiences, yearnings, expectations and psychological frustrations of rural migrant workers. Due to its uniqueness, this type of poetry is receiving constant interest from intellectuals, literary critics, the media and the general public both in China and abroad. Based on the literary analysis of dagong poetry samples, the article highlights and discusses the typical features of form and content of this poetry, shows how dagong poetry simultaneously reveals both individual and collective self-expression of migrant workers as a subaltern class and portrays migrant workers as a certain type of ‘imagined community’ of shared fate and identity.

By surveying major scholarly works on the topic, supplemented by extensive fieldwork data, the paper provides broad and comprehensive overview of the most scholarly significant issues surrounding the genre, namely its social and historical background as well as debate on validity of the term “dagong poetry” itself, which constitutes a hot button issue in the Chinese literary discourse. By analysing a number of poems, the article provides in depth analysis of stylistic and thematic features prevalent in dagong poetry. It concludes that the most common themes in the genre are working conditions, living conditions and urban environment, experiences of displacement, depiction of social issues as well as portrayal of certain historical events.

**Keywords:** China, poetry, subaltern, dagong, rural migrant workers, cultural policy.

## Introduction

The economic reforms initiated in China in 1978 gave rise to one of the biggest internal

migrations in world history, as countless inhabitants of poor inland provinces started moving to the rapidly developing urban metropolises on China’s coastline. This numerous group of people, which as of 2018 were 286 million people, or roughly around quarter of China’s population, or quarter of World’s mobile population<sup>2</sup>. This large body of people is often referred

<sup>1</sup> The article is a reworked version of a chapter in the author’s Research MA thesis “Grassroots-Government Interactions in the Literary Field: The Dagong Poets’ Community of the Pearl River Delta, China”, submitted in 2018 for Leiden University. Open Access version of the thesis can be accessed via: <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/66408>

<sup>2</sup> Sun 2014b, p. 19.

to as *nongmingong* 农民工, which literally means “peasant worker”, but signifies anyone who has rural residential status but works in urban or suburban areas<sup>3</sup>. This type of “floating population” is mostly prevalent in Pearl River Delta area, China’s manufacturing powerhouse, however rural migrant workers also reside in China’s other metropolitan areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Wuhan, Chongqing etc.

Another term, widely used in migrant workers’ discourse is *dagong* 打工, a slang word originated from Cantonese dialect, which literally means “working for the boss” and connotes the commodification of labor, where “the boss” refers to a capitalist boss and labor is exchanged for wages according to the rules dictated by market forces, in contrast to labor relations of China’s socialist period when everyone was employed by the state<sup>4</sup>. A person who “works for the boss” is called *dagongzhe* 打工者. And among these, mostly lowly educated, subaltern people there are a few that write poetry.

What exactly is “dagong poetry” (or *dagong shige* 打工诗歌 in Chinese)? It is a wide and eclectic literary genre, written by Chinese rural migrant workers, who move to the cities to make a living, because of a lack of economic opportunities in the countryside. Since most rural migrant workers lack formal education, one of the most explicit features of their poems is that they tend to be relatively “unpolished” in terms of tone, register, rhythm, line length etc<sup>5</sup>. *Dagong* poetry usually tends to employ

simple structure and colloquial vocabulary to express ideas in a fairly straightforward way. Themes of such poetry texts usually delve around personal experiences of being rural migrant worker: harsh and dehumanizing working conditions, workplace accidents, often depicted in very realistically graphic and gory way, mistreatment and social injustice, social, ecological and sometimes feminist critique of society, urban alienation, nostalgia and homesickness, as well as documentary depiction of specific historical events. For this reason poems by rural migrant workers can be treated as a form of historical documentation and are often regarded as “some of the most authentic, if not authoritative and objective, evidence about life and work of a marginalized yet populous mobile community”<sup>6</sup>. Descriptiveness and supposedly authentic representation of grassroots voices constitute some of the primary reasons why *dagong* poetry attracts the attention of various venues, including academia, journalists, NGO’s etc. But is there more to it than this historical-documentary perspective? Is there more to this body of literature worth of scholarly attention than just its historical value? Wherein lies this poetry’s significance?

While the significance of this poetry genre in Chinese language scholarship has been acknowledged for a time being, with number monographies, doctoral dissertations and scholarly articles published in China<sup>7</sup>, English language academia has only started paying substantial attention to it in

3 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

4 Pun 2005, pp. 12-3.

5 Van Crevel 2017a.

6 Sun 2012b, pp. 998-9.

7 See He 2010.

recent years. Studies by Heather Inwood<sup>8</sup>, Gong Haomin<sup>9</sup>, Wanning Sun<sup>10</sup>, Justyna Jaguścik<sup>11</sup>, Amy Dooling<sup>12</sup>, and more recently, Maghiel van Crevel<sup>13</sup> explore great variety of issues surrounding this peculiar body of literature and complex questions it raises.

In this paper, basing myself off on previous English and Chinese language scholarship, literary analysis of dagong poetry texts as well as extensive data, gathered during my fieldwork in Guangdong province of mainland China in 2017, where I conducted number unstructured qualitative interviews with poets, literary critics and poetry readers, I am going to survey the most salient issues surrounding the phenomenon of *dagong* poetry. I will start with exploring the social background of the people, rural migrant workers, the source of this literary genre, which constitute Chinese postsocialist subalterns. After establishing social background of *dagong* poetry, I will move to historical background and will contextualize its positionality within history of Chinese working class literature, as well as provide brief chronological development of the genre from its inception in mid-1980s to recent years. Debate on definitions of *dagong* poetry, a highly contentious and controversial issue within the discourse on the genre is another important topic that will be addressed. After elaborating on social, historical and discursive background, I will finally move to discussing form and

content of the poems associated with the genre. I argue that thematically dagong poems generally fall into five distinct categories: working conditions, living conditions and urban environment, experiences of displacement, depiction of social issues as well as portrayal of certain historical events, however it is quite usual for certain poems encompass more than one of said themes simultaneously. The analysis also demonstrates, how dagong poetry simultaneously reveals both individual and collective self-expression of migrant workers as a subaltern class and portrays migrant workers as a certain type of 'imagined community' of shared fate and identity.

### 1. Rural Migrant Workers as Postsocialist Subalterns

Cultural anthropologist Tamara Jacka (2006)<sup>14</sup> points out three reasons for the emergence of Chinese rural migrant population in the late 1980s: stagnation of the rural economy, which led to a widening rural-urban income gap, rampant corruption and substandard quality of public services compared to the cities, and mass media influence, which catalysed a yearning among the rural population to see more of the world and to enjoy consumer pleasures unavailable in the economically stagnant countryside. At the same time, rampant economic development in the cities has dramatically increased the need for manual labor and rural migrants are willing – or compelled – to provide this at a lower cost than the urban population.

8 Inwood 2011.

9 Gong 2012.

10 Sun 2014.

11 Jaguścik 2014.

12 Dooling 2017.

13 Van Crevel 2017a; 2017b; 2017c and 2019.

14 Jacka 2006, pp. 6-7.

Chinese migrant workers are often considered as belonging to *diceng* 底层, literally the “low(est) class or stratum” in society and often referred to as postsocialist subalterns in academia. Postsocialism is an ambiguous term coined by Arif Dirlik that defines a residual influence of socialist mind-set in former socialist societies in a similar fashion as postcolonialism defines the remnants of colonial influences in postcolonial societies<sup>15</sup>. The term “subaltern” was popularised in academia by the Indian Subaltern Studies Group to analyse agents that were previously underrepresented in colonial discourse. Started in India in late 1970’s, subaltern studies were an academic movement, which intended to reject elitist narratives of Indian history, based on colonialist, Marxist and nationalist positions. The term itself was borrowed from the works of Antonio Gramsci and in the broadest sense means person’s subordination due to the ones’ class, caste, gender, racial or cultural belonging<sup>16</sup>. Consisting of a wide range of scholars, that based their scholarship on structuralist and poststructuralist works of Michel Foucault, Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes among others, subaltern study group gave birth to a multitude of significant ideas considering the knowledge of subaltern agency, autonomy, voice, and methods (albeit not always successful) on how to retrieve it.

Chinese media scholar Lu Xinyu started applying the concept of subalternity to the context of postsocialist China. According to her, as of the early 1990’s, what had previous-

ly been unitary social spacial relationships in Chinese society had collapsed, leading to a separation between the lowest classes and the rest of society<sup>17</sup>. For this reason rural migrant workers as are often treated as “other” by Chinese media and society.

There are several structural means, judicial and discursive, that reinforce the “othering” of rural migrant workers by government and society. The main judicial means are strict household registration (*hukou* 户口) laws that assign rural inhabitants to an inferior position. While initially created to control domestic migration, and to keep the cities from overpopulation, since 1980’s the *hukou* system has been gradually alleviated to allow rural migrants to work in cities but without granting them social welfare and protection of workers’ rights. Thus, by being officially registered as “rural residents”, a status which is extremely difficult to alter, rural migrant workers and their children are subject to almost inescapable poverty and exploitation<sup>18</sup>.

In terms of discursive practices, the rural migrant population is demeaned by a discourse on “personal quality” (*suzhi* 素质). Chinese mass media frequently stereotypes people of rural origin as lacking “culture”, irrational, rude, misbehaved and ignorant, and thus they are pressured by media narratives into internalising the need of “self-regulation” and “self-development” in order to improve their “quality”, yet feel inferior due to their inability to do so<sup>19</sup>. This contributes to the justification of their subaltern position, and the “quality” narrative

15 Hockx 2015, pp 12-13.

16 Prakash 1994, pp. 1477-8.

17 Zhao 2010, p. 20.

18 Chan & Selden, 2016, p. 3.

19 Jacka 2006, pp. 41-2.

is also helpful in devaluing their labor, thus allowing employers to keep the wages of migrant rural workers low<sup>20</sup>. An illustrative example of this phenomenon can be taken from a detailed survey on Foxconn electronics manufacturing company business practices by Pun et al (2016). In spite of high market value of iPhone cell phones, manufacturing for which mostly takes place in mainland China, as of 2010, Chinese labor cost had only accounted for 1.8% of individual product's US retail price<sup>21</sup>.

Media practices play a substantial role in the formation of migrant workers discourse. Mistreatment by business enterprises and government institutions often drives migrant workers to seek various kinds of redress. Since legal means for solving issues, such as petitioning to the relevant government institutions, rarely provide the desired results, desperation can drive mistreated migrant workers to violence, prominently including suicide, with frequent suicides of Foxconn assembly line workers since 2010 being a notable example that has generated much media attention. Even though in covering these incidents mass media seems to give voice to migrant workers to express their grievances, the final say on representation of subalterns lies in the hands of power structures, as the portrayal of *dagongzhe* varies greatly from sympathy to mockery depending on political guidelines as well as business interests adhering to capitalist logic<sup>22</sup>. That said, the 2014 suicide of *dagong* poet Xu Lizhi 许立志 (1990-2014), a Foxconn employee,

has become a powerful sensation, which contributed to a major surge of interest in *dagong* poetry among both academics and public<sup>23</sup>. The case of Xu Lizhi demonstrates the power of *dagong* poet's status, which can be a viable tool for attracting public's attention to migrant workers' issues.

## 2. Historical Development of Working Class Literature in Mainland China

The origins of Chinese working class poetic writing lies in the emergence of modern Chinese poetry as part of the "May Fourth" movement (五四运动) and the New Culture Movement (新文化运动) of the late 1910s and 1920s that attempted to modernise Chinese literature<sup>24</sup>. In the early 1920's, debate over the purpose of poetry writing divided many intellectuals into two camps: the former were advocates for poetry for poetry's sake, while the latter saw it as means of serving the masses<sup>25</sup>. Among the proponents of poetry's role of improving society there were many leftist intellectuals. According to Wu Ji 吴季, a key theorizer and advocate of worker poetry, one of them, Yin Fu 殷夫 (1910-1931), can be considered as the pioneer of worker-themed literature in China<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, neither left wing writings, nor May Fourth literary corpus at large held any significant impact on working class population that at the time was mostly illiterate<sup>27</sup>. However a

20 Zhang 2014, p. 18.

21 Pun et al 2016, p. 169.

22 Sun 2012a, p. 872.

23 For a recent study on Xu Lizhi and his poetic oeuvre, see van Crevel 2019.

24 See Hockx 2016.

25 Inwood 2011, p. 50.

26 Wu 2015, p. 1.

27 Ibid.

certain type of workers' songs (工人歌谣) that could be considered as a prototype of worker poetry existed. Since Chinese population was predominantly rural and most workers originated from countryside, workers' songs had usually appropriated form and melodies from rural folk music, yet the lyrics focused on factory work related themes. The Republican era workers' songs used to be transmitted orally, a tradition that has since died out, and only a fraction of the songs, collected by ethnographers, has survived to this day<sup>28</sup>.

During the socialist period, cultural policy in China was based on Mao Zedong's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话, two speeches from 1942 that delineated the function of art and literature as that of a political tool that has to reflect the life and feelings of the working classes. To serve this agenda, "worker-peasant-soldier" (工农兵) literature, which intended to portray life of these three social groups, became a mainstream genre. Based on "socialist realist" (社会主义现实主义) and "revolutionary romanticist" (革命浪漫主义) aesthetics, it was intended to represent working classes adhering to a set of strict political guidelines that did not leave much space for creativity. Socialist-period workers' poetry, sometimes referred to as "old workers' poetry" (老工人诗歌) tended to express a collective voice, an optimistic, uplifting tone and explicit patriotism, combined with unanimous praise for the CCP, Chairman Mao and the socialist political system. The more individualistic and pes-

simistic post-socialist *dagong* poetry is a very different thing<sup>29</sup>. If in *dagong* poetry *dagongzhe* are often portrayed as oppressed, mistreated and lacking control of their destiny, "old workers' poetry" portrays workers as being in control of their fate<sup>30</sup>.

In the Post-Mao era, market reforms caused a decline in both workers' status and government control of literature, which gave rise to different literary forms. In 1985 Shenzhen municipal government cultural policy researcher Yang Honghai found what he would later identify as the earliest known example of *dagong* poetry written on a toilet wall, and was inspired to engage in more thorough research on and cultural advocacy for the genre<sup>31</sup>. The earliest *dagong* poems were anonymous, short in length because due to brutal working and living conditions the authors had no time or financial means to engage in writing longer or more complex literary forms.

Since early 1990's situation began to change. Writings by *dagong* authors, including prose, poetry and essays started to appear in local periodicals and literary magazines of Delta region, including *Dapeng Bay* 《大鹏湾》, *Special Zone Literature* 《特区文学》 in Shenzhen, the *Yangcheng Evening News* 《羊城晚报》 etc. With help and promotion by Yang Honghai<sup>32</sup>, writings by rural

29 Wright 2017, pp. 54-57.

30 Qin 2015, p. 46.

31 Yang 2011, p. 397.

32 According to Yang (2011), Yang Honghai was the first to use the term "*dagong* literature" in academic discourse, which he did in his 1991 article 《打工世界与打工文学》 (Dagong World and Dagong Literature), published in Guangdong based journal of literary criticism 《当代文坛报》 (Contemporary Literature Forum magazine). Ever since he

28 Ibid, p. 3.

migrant authors started to be referred to as “*dagong* literature” 打工文学, a pigeonholing term that has begun to be used by critics, mass media and academia, even though many *dagong* authors themselves found the term pejorative and not everyone liked it<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, with the help of media and scholarly attention, the first generation of *dagong* poets, a term commonly describing the ones who were born in 1960’s and 1970’s and started writing and publishing their poetry in 1990’s, came into being. Some of the most successful first generation *dagong* poets, such as Xie Xiangnan 谢湘南, even managed to rise to national fame.

The turn of the millennium saw tremendous growth in both *dagong* poetry as well discourse on this poetry. In 2001, a group of *dagong* poetry activists, led by Xu Qiang 徐强 (b. 1973), Luo Deyuan 罗德远 (b. 1968) and others, established *The Dagong Poet* 《打工诗人》, an unofficial grassroots *dagong* poetry periodical, initially based in Huizhou and later in Guangzhou. While various short lived grassroots *dagong* poetry publications existed before, with *Labor Circles* 《劳动界》, founded in 1988, probably being the earliest<sup>34</sup>, *The Dagong Poet* became the most influential due to its authors’ dedicated efforts in providing structural survey, support and promotion of *dagong* poetry scene<sup>35</sup>. The success of the periodical led to a number of *dagong* poetry anthologies, edited by Xu Qiang, Luo Deyuan and Chen Zhongcun

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was engaged in promotion and advocacy work for the genre (p. 400).

33 Personal communication with *dagong* poets Chen Nianxi (March, 2017) and Huang Jiwen (June, 2017).

34 Qin 2015, p.4.

35 Van Creveld 2017b.

陈忠村 (b. 1975). Besides grassroots periodicals, *dagong* poetry would frequently appear in various official media publications, like *Dagong Literature* 《打工文学》, a weekly supplement to *Ba’an Daily* 《宝安日报》, an official newspaper of Shenzhen Bao’an district, home to the city’s one of the biggest migrant workers’ populations, being a prominent example.

Besides print publications, another form of media, the Internet, became the realm of *dagong* poetry activities. According to Huang Jiwen<sup>36</sup>, most *dagongzhe* started using computers and the Internet in early 2000’s. Online poetry communities on BBS discussion boards, websites and personal blogs helped spreading *dagong* poetry discourse, opening possibilities for the growth of a *dagong* poets’ community, allowing for it to spread outside of its initial geographical borders. *Dagong* poets that were born in the 1980’s and became active in the 2000s have become known as the second generation. This include several well accomplished authors including Zheng Xiaoqiong, the most well-known *dagong* poet in China and abroad, whom Inwood calls “a poster girl” for the genre<sup>37</sup>.

After 2012, the massive use of smartphones and development of the Chinese mobile Internet have increased access to *dagong* poems, via microblogs and the WeChat social media platform. This has led to the establishment of the all-China *Dagong* Poets’ Association 打工诗社, which has an active online presence on WeChat, as well as various local *dagong* poetry associations,

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36 Personal communication, June 2017.

37 Inwood 2011, p. 53.

such as that in Picun near Beijing (WeChat public account name *Picun Gongyou* 皮村工友), the Gansu-province based Long Dong Dagong Literature 陇东打工文学 etc.

While *dagong* poetry has become more accessible than ever before, the number of successful *dagong* poets among the ones born in 1990's is much smaller than in earlier generations. In *My Poetry: Outstanding Works of Contemporary Workers Poetry (Poems of Contemporary Workers)* 《我的诗篇:当代工人诗典》, a comprehensive anthology of workers' poetry, edited by Qin Xiaoyu and released in 2015, Xu Lizhi 许立志 is the only author born in the 1990's whose writings were included. Also, most of my informants expressed lament that poems by the youngest generation of *dagong* poets, with the notable exception of Xu Lizhi, are lacking quality. While Yang Honghai<sup>38</sup> mostly feels optimistic about the newest generation of *dagong* poets and believes that it is a matter of time when young talents will enter the limelight, Wu Ji holds a pessimistic stance, believing that *dagong* poetry has lost its momentum, and since 2012 has entered its withering phase, since most of its original members are no longer within the ranks of the subaltern class, therefore can no longer produce authentic *dagong* literature<sup>39</sup>.

### 3. Debate on Definitions of *Dagong* poetry

The definition of *dagong* poetry as well as the need for such a term in the first place are highly debated topics within the *dagong*

poetry discourse. The most detailed survey of various positions towards the issues in the discourse is done by Sun Wanning<sup>40</sup>. Since further contribution to the analysis of the definitional debate is beyond the scope of the thesis, in this section I will shortly summarise Sun's discussion, which I will supplement with my own fieldwork observations.

As mentioned in the previous section, the poets with a rural migrant working background did not come up with *dagong* label themselves, instead it was done by government cultural policy researcher Yang Honghai and his colleagues. Some *dagong* poets find the label beneficial for two main reasons. Firstly, it provides visibility for unknown, yet talented underclass people, for whom otherwise it would be difficult to establish themselves in literary circles. Secondly, it gives them the opportunity to express the voice of the subalterns through their poetry to make their plight more visible in the public eye. On the other hand, many authors find the label degrading, as they suspect that being "a *dagong* poet" implies being inferior to simply being "a poet". Such a suspicion has a certain amount of rationale – many literary critics, while praising *dagong* poetry for its authentic depiction of subaltern experiences as well as its alleged positive social impact on society, often tend to depict the genre on a whole as lacking artistic quality<sup>41</sup>. This leads to a broader issue of the criteria of poetry evaluation. While there is multitude of aspects based on which

38 Personal communication, May 2017.

39 Personal communication, May 2017.

40 Sun 2014b.

41 Ibid, p. 172.



poetry could be judged, it is fairly common in China that elitist literary critics evaluate it mostly through elitist-aesthetic aspects, thus according to *dagong* poet and literary critic Liu Dongwu, denying *dagong* poets entry to the literary field<sup>42</sup>. Therefore Sun concludes that “*dagong* poetry” label is “a double-edged sword, simultaneously stigmatizing and confirming”<sup>43</sup>.

Another significant question is what can and cannot be considered as *dagong* poetry. There are three main positions in the discourse: poetry written by *dagongzhe*; poetry that deals with *dagongzhe* as its subject matter; poetry that depicts perspective of *dagongzhe* as a subject, rather than merely portraying them as objects<sup>44</sup>. Simply put, there are author-based, subject matter-based and perspective-based definitions of the genre; however, they often converge. It could be deduced that in order to write from the perspective of *dagongzhe*, one has to engage with *dagong* subject matter and in order to do so persuasively, experience of being *dagongzhe* would come in handy, hence the three definitions are by no means contradictory. For example, many of my interviewees were of the opinion that what they perceive as authentic *dagong* poetry expresses certain emotions that people who have had *dagongzhe* experiences can relate to, and they would emphasise the necessity for the poet to have a significant amount of *dagong* experience in order to produce such impact. And while Yang Honghai holds that there were cases of authentic *dagong* poetry written by people outside of the so-

cial group (mostly journalists and cultural anthropologists who have spent long time surveying migrant workers), such poets are rare exceptions<sup>45</sup>.

However for how long one can be considered a *dagong* poet? Is it a lifetime label or can it signify a particular period in a poet’s oeuvre? While the answer to the second question is far from clear-cut, and depends on many different variables, according to my observations, “*dagong* poet” is a lifetime personal identity in most cases. Many *dagong* poets often remain to be labelled as such long after leaving their subaltern statuses and moving away from *dagong* themes in their writing altogether. Some, like Luo Deyuan who currently works as a vice chairman of Zengcheng district Writers Association of Guangzhou, a high level position within the government bureaucracy, still embrace this label as it allows him to act as an intermediary between subalterns and party-state institutions.

Quite a different example that demonstrates overwhelming power of labelling is Chen Nianxi 陈年喜 (b. 1970)<sup>46</sup>. Born in rural mountain area of Shaanxi province, he started his poet’s career in 1990 while working as a farmer in his native village. While being initially considered as a “rural poet” (农民诗人), he won numerous awards for his poems, which granted him moderate fame within literary circles. In 1999, due to insufficient income in the countryside, he started his *dagong* period – worked as a demolition expert in coal mines in multiple

42 Ibid, p 174.

43 Ibid, p. 172.

44 Sun 2012b, pp. 1001-2.

45 Personal Communication, May, 2017.

46 Chen Nianxi biographical details are summarised from Wang (2016) as well as personal communication (March, 2017).

locations in China. Poems from this period, specifically the ones that deal with his work experiences as subject matter, has brought him international acclaim, especially – many years later – due to his participation in the documentary by Qin Xiaoyu that was mentioned above. However due to major health issues, Chen was forced to quit his job in late 2015. He currently works as a content writer in a local travel agency of Guizhou province, a white collar job and ever since has ceased to belong to subaltern class and his newest oeuvre no longer deals with the *dagong* issues. While only the middle period of Chen's oeuvre can be considered as *dagong* poetry, he still often remains labelled as such, even though he himself objects to this and would like to be referred to simply as “a poet” instead<sup>47</sup>.

Another label, closely related to *dagong* poetry is “contemporary worker poetry” 当代工人诗歌 that shares its name with but is slightly different from the worker poetry of the Mao Era that is “the old worker poetry”. The fundamental difference between the two is that *dagong* poetry is a genre written by people working in the private sector (mostly rural migrant workers), while “worker poets” are the ones that work at state enterprises. Differences in style, subject matter, even living conditions of the poets are not always significant, yet there is a clear cut divide in poetry discourse between these two groups. According to Shengzi 绳子<sup>48</sup>, a self-identified worker poet, there is a sense of enmity from *dagong* poets towards their worker counterparts. It is often assumed that

state industry employees have more stable jobs with various benefits and privileges, therefore they lead much “easier” lives as opposed to *dagongzhe*. While this is not always the case, confrontation with some members of the *dagong* poetry community led Shengzi to founding a web based poets' community, called Worker Poets' Union 工人诗歌联盟 in 2003, which in 2005 launched *Worker Poetry* 工人诗歌 magazine, unofficial publication, coedited with Wu Ji.

While sharing many similarities in terms of style and subject matter, worker poetry possesses certain differences as compared to *dagong* writing. According to Wu Ji<sup>49</sup>, worker poetry is more consistent with worker rights issues, sometimes openly embraces New Left or Marxist political standpoints, while *dagong* poets merely use their writings as “a bridge to fortune”, and after elevating themselves from subaltern statuses, tend to forget about their former peers. According to him, such behaviour has led *dagong* poetry to decline in creativity, because the core members of the movement have followed either business or governmental careers, while there are not many talents in the younger generation to keep the community vibrant. Workers, on the other hand, are more likely to retain their working class statuses for entire life, thus they tend to be more consistent in their literary writing.

#### 4. Poetic texts: Form and Content

In this section, I am going to discuss stylistic and thematic features prevalent in *dagong* poetry. To better illustrate my argu-

47 Personal communication, May, 2017.

48 Personal communication, March 2017.

49 Personal communication, March 2017.

ment, I will provide several excerpts from *dagong* poems, taken from *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry* (2016), edited by Qin Xiaoyu and translated into English by Eleanor Goodman.

*Dagong* poetry, similarly to other literary genres based on author's identity (exile literature, women's literature, queer literature etc.), triggers what van Crevel calls the preposition game: we can ask whether *dagong* poetry can or should be a poetry written by the *dagongzhe*, about the *dagongzhe*, for the *dagongzhe* or of the *dagongzhe*, which signifies *dagong* subject matter as something like the property of the *dagong* poets<sup>50</sup>. Also, can a *dagong* poet write anything but *dagong* poetry? A cursory look into almost any *dagong* poet's oeuvre would reveal that far from everything written by *dagongzhe* deals with *dagong* related topics, and in some cases (as with Chen Nianxi), *dagong* themed poetry would merely constitute a tiny fraction of a particular poet's writings. Considering the fact that the genre is mostly defined by its authors' social background and its subject matter, rather than by specific aesthetic or formal features, it is no surprise that *dagong* poetry is a highly eclectic genre in terms of technique and themes. Still, one could argue that certain characteristics make *dagong* poems recognisable as a distinct genre, although far from every poetic text written by a *dagong* poet would fall within the range of these characteristics.

Since most rural migrant workers lack formal education, one of the most explicit features of their poems is that they tend to be relatively "unpolished" in terms of tone,

<sup>50</sup> Van Crevel 2017c, p 37.

register, rhythm, line length etc<sup>51</sup>. *Dagong* poetry usually tends to employ simple structure and colloquial vocabulary to express ideas in a fairly straightforward way. It generally falls within the range of *minjian* 民间 (can be translated as "popular", "people's", "of the people", "folk", "commoners" etc.) poetry, a highly contested and debated concept, widely used in Chinese literary discourse to describe literary position that claims to represent the common people, as opposed to the government and "intellectuals"<sup>52</sup>. The definition of *minjian* is elastic and can refer to various issues, such as genre, the author's identity, subject matter, sentiment, position etc<sup>53</sup>. Most of the *dagong* poets I interviewed during fieldwork identified themselves and *dagong* poetry genre at large as a form of *minjian* writing.

Another salient feature of *dagong* poetry is close connection between the texts and its authors' biographies. As mentioned earlier both critics and general public mostly value *dagong* poetry as a source of authentic subaltern experiences, therefore the poems that are closely connected to its authors' real life experiences and manage to portray such experiences effectively are generally most valued. The ability to represent *dagong* experiences bestows *dagong* poets with authenticity and credibility to speak on behalf of *dagongzhe*, which is one the main types of *dagong* poets' subcultural capital<sup>54</sup>. For this reason *dagong* poetry is

<sup>51</sup> Van Crevel 2017a.

<sup>52</sup> See van Crevel 2008, pp. 399-458 and van Crevel 2017c, pp. 46-56.

<sup>53</sup> Li, 2008 p.188.

<sup>54</sup> Sun 2014b, p. 181.

often marketed in the way that enforces its authors' biographical connection to the content of his/her poems. A vivid example for this could be the portrayal of previously mentioned poet Chen Nianxi in *The Verse of Us*<sup>55</sup>. The film goes to great lengths to portray Chen as a demolition worker who spends most of his time in mountain mines, away from his family, and later shows Chen's elderly father – critically ill and completely dependent on his son's care and finances. In “Demolition Mark” 《炸裂志》, one of the most famous poems by Chen Nianxi, we find passages that reflect exactly same narrative as depicted in the documentary:

I spend my middle age five kilometres  
inside mountains  
I explode the rocks layer by layer  
to put my life back together

My humble family  
is far away at the foot of Mt. Shang  
they're sick and their bodies are covered  
in dust  
whatever is taken from my life  
extends the tunnel of their old age<sup>56</sup>

Chen's biographical details suggest that a viable way to interpret the poem is to assume that the narrator of the poem is its author himself. At the same time, the laconic nature of the lines, that are free of overly personal details, also allows one to construe the “I” in the poem not as a voice of a specific person but as a voice of every

demolition worker, even as far as every *dagongzhe* that shares a similar fate. The “I” reflects a personal tragedy, which at the same time is a collective tragedy of every *dagongzhe* at large – going away from their families to sacrifice their bodies in a form of capitalist labor-value relations, to at least temporarily save their families, even though this “saving” usually making their own lives even harder or indeed sacrificing them.

In this way many of the most successful *dagong* poems allow a multi-level reading:

1. As an expression of personal experiences;
2. As an expression of collective experiences of a group;
3. As an expression of experiences by migrant workers at large as a social class.

To sum up my argument here, in order to attain such an effect, ideally, a *dagong* poem is personal enough to recognise its author's biographical details (which provides the sense of authenticity), yet applicable to other migrant workers' situation.

There is a plethora of issues reflected in *dagong* poetry that can be loosely classified into five main themes: working conditions, living conditions and urban environment, experiences of displacement, depiction of social issues as well as portrayal of certain historical events. Each of this theme can be addressed in a variety of different ways, from blunt documentary depiction of the events to parable, historical allusions, mockery, satire or irony. It is also very common for these themes to overlap in a single poem, and there are many poems that do not fall into any of the five categories.

One of the main themes in *dagong* poetry, as already demonstrated in “Demolition

55 Qin and Wu 2015.

56 Qin 2016, p. 60.

Mark”, is labor conditions. The merciless assembly line, rusty towering cranes, exhausted bodies dripping with blood and sweat, workplace injuries and deaths etc. – these are frequently encountered subject matter in *dagong* poems that depict grim and depressing reality of working conditions China’s subaltern population has to put up with in their daily lives. An illustrative example of this could be an excerpt from “Plastic Molding Factory” 《在一家塑胶厂》 a poem by Chen Caifeng 陈才锋 (b. 1979):

Accidentally dropped into the  
mountains, no echo to be found

More than a thousand tons of plastic  
molding machines live in half a  
square kilometer, and at noon the  
mechanical arm  
practices its stroll in the air, a group of  
ants frantically  
works the assembly line, groups of  
plastic pellets  
hurry to the firing, high temperatures,  
extrusion

On the worktable is a small blade,  
tape,  
tape dispensers, production labels,  
and in the end no one knows where it  
all goes<sup>57</sup>

It can be noted that in this poem the machinery is personified (“machines live”, “the mechanical arm”) and portrayed as big and powerful (“more than a thousand

57 Qin 2016, p. 97.

tons of plastic”, “half a square kilometer”), while people are depicted as small and deindividuated and insignificant (“a group of ants”), creating a surreal imagery. This motif of workers being frail and insignificant as compared to massive size of industrial machinery is also powerfully depicted elsewhere, especially in Wang Bing’s 王兵 (b. 1967) critically acclaimed documentary *West of the Tracks* 《铁西区》<sup>58</sup>. Such depiction, among other things, confirms a notion that in this type of poetry, *dagongzhe* are generally portrayed as frail and lacking control over their fate<sup>59</sup>.

Another example, the poem “Watch Factory” (钟表厂) by Chi Moshu 池沫树 (b. 1980) is slightly different in tone and style:

I work in a watch factory  
the watch factory gives no days off  
since time keeps on going and life  
doesn’t stop  
our work doesn’t stop either

I fit my life into the assembly line  
Dividing it into lunch and dinner, and  
breakfast used for a nap  
at night working overtime until ten, I  
adjust the watches’ dials to twelve<sup>60</sup>

This excerpt of the poem is a blunt description of a worker’s everyday schedule. It is light in tone, slightly ironic and lacks explicit imagery, yet it again shows a *dagongzhe*, who in this case is the narrator of the poem, as merely a cog in the machine of pro-

58 Lu 2010, p. 62.

59 Qin 2015, p. 46.

60 Qin 2016, p. 155.

duction, who lacks control of his own life. The assembly line, instead of merely being a working tool, is portrayed as a central axis, according to which the narrator's rhythm of life is set. Widespread labor rights violations, such as (likely unpaid or underpaid) overtime work and lack of days off lead to fatigue, which forces the "I" of the poems to forfeit breakfast in order to compensate the lack of sleeping time. Therefore Chi's poem, similar to most of the *dagong* writing, depicts working conditions as exhausting, hard to bear, damaging health as well dehumanising; at the same time, *dagongzhe* are portrayed as powerless and lacking agency to bring about any meaningful change.

Besides working conditions, exilic subject matter is also very common in *dagong* poetic writing. Many *dagong* poems depict life in the city, which in some cases is contrasted to their rural hometowns. Since the cruel living and working conditions and social discrimination of migrant workers is rampant in urban areas, cities in *dagong* poetry are unsurprisingly depicted in a mostly negative light. Urban imagery is commonly employed for the sake of emphasizing loneliness and the alienation migrant workers experience in cities. For example, the city lights in "Industrial Zone" 《工业区》, a poem by Zheng Xiaoqiong, are set to expose the migrant workers' vulnerabilities:

The fluorescent lights are lit, the  
buildings are lit, the machines are lit  
exhaustion is lit, the blueprints are lit...  
this is Sunday night, this the night of  
August 15<sup>th</sup>  
the moon lights up a disk of emptiness,  
in the lychee trees

a light breeze sways an internal  
whiteness, many years of speechless  
quiet, in the evergreen grasses the  
insects hum, the city's lights illuminate  
the industrial zone, so many dialects,  
so much homesickness,  
so many weak and insubstantial bodies  
placed there, so much moonlight  
shining

...

And the tears, joy, and pain we've had  
our glorious or petty ideas, and our  
souls  
are all illuminated by the moonlight,  
collected, and carried afar  
hidden in rays of light no one will  
notice<sup>61</sup>

The scene painted by the poem is easy to grasp: an industrial zone at night, full of migrant workers ("so many dialects, so much homesickness") lit by street lighting and a full moon. The electric lights of the city seem to collaborate with the moonlight in lighting up the scenery, yet simultaneously light up the migrant workers' feelings, emotions and thoughts. The phrase "insubstantial bodies" evokes a similar sentiment of migrant workers' weakness and lack of agency, like "a group of ants" in Chen Caifeng's poem discussed above. Their frailty seems to be so obvious that it cannot be hidden in the night's darkness.

On the surface level the poem serves as a vivid depiction of an industrial zone in a Guangdong (signified by lychee trees) hot tropical summer night. An important keyword that sets the mood and helps to understand the poem at deeper level is

61 Qin 2016, p. 155.

“homesickness”. The experience of alienation and estrangement far away from home and feeling nostalgia for one’s home, yet being unable to come back for economic reasons, can be interpreted as exilic experience. Longing for one’s hometown is a common trope in *dagong* poetry, however, as Sun Wanning observes, home space in most of the poems is rendered as nostalgic imaginary space to which there is no possibility to return<sup>62</sup>. A useful example could be Tang Yihong’s 唐以洪 (b. 1970) poem “Returning Home Backwards” 《退着回到故乡》. The poem re-enacts the narrator’s whole life memories backwards, providing a brief story back in time in space, from current life to childhood, from the city where the “I” of the poem lives now to cities where he has previously lived and eventually to countryside:

...  
 return and return, return from the  
 factories  
 return from machines, return from tears,  
 return from forty back to thirty  
 to twenty, to ten... home is still  
 very far, it’s a pair of lost straw sandals  
 return and return, facing the future  
 return to your mother’s body – and there  
 there’s no glory or dishonour, no  
 difference between rich and poor  
 no separation between city and  
 country. There are no tears  
 and everyone you meet is family<sup>63</sup>

As the lines “from forty back to thirty / to twenty, to ten” suggests, the narrator returns to his/her childhood, which makes the journey a thought experiment rather than an actual physical return. The juxtaposition of

62 Sun 2014b, p. 166.

63 Qin 2016, p.51.

factories, machines and tears, which in the next lines is paralleled with a person’s age periods of being in their forties, thirties, and teens, shows that unhappy recent city life is contrasted with the idyllic childhood in the countryside, among one’s family members. This nostalgic space is too distant, in fact, completely unreachable but by the narrator’s memory. Therefore *Returning Home Backwards* can be understood as an exile poem.

Serious social issues are another prominent kind of subject matter in *dagong* poetry. Social critique present in *dagong* poetry encompasses various problems, from unfair treatment by the boss, unpaid wages, to feminist critique of gender inequality, ecological problems or the ills of modern consumerist society. Zheng Xiaoqiong’s poem “Kneeling Workers Demanding Their Pay” 《跪着的讨薪水者》 is a powerful depiction of *dagongzhe* being mistreated by commercial enterprises and the government. Like in other most well-known poems by Zheng, by using fairly coarse and laconic language, is able to provide a staggeringly realistic portrayal of a situation many migrant workers have experienced:

... today they kneel facing the big  
 bright window  
 the black uniformed guards the  
 shiny cars the green bushes  
 the dazzling factory sign glints in the sun  
 they kneel at the factory entrance  
 holding a cardboard sign  
 with scrawled words Give us our  
 hard earned money<sup>64</sup>

Although the text realistically depicts a single, unspecified event, as a poem it el-

64 Qin 2016, p. 126.

evates it to the level of collective experience in a similar way as Chen Nianxi does it in “Demolition Mark”. In the poem, by depicting a specific scene of four suffering women, the author reflects the issues that are common to many *dagongzhe*: humiliation from their bosses by not paying wages, mistreatment by government officials and law enforcement, and desperate attempts to redress their grievances through petitions and protesting.

While Zheng’s poetry sparingly uses concrete historical details, some *dagong* poems deal with specific historical events. Some poems record personal life events, such as Zhang Shougang’s 张守刚 (b. 1971) poem on how he lost four fingers in a workplace accident (“1993: Repair Shop in Jiangkou” 《1993: 江口的汽修厂》); poems about the infamous Sun Zhigang incident, in which a student, who came to Guangzhou for seasonal labor, was stopped by the police and asked to provide his temporary residence permit (暂住证), a document all migrant workers used to be required to carry with them all the time and was beaten to death by failing to show one; or other issues *dagong* poets tend to find salient. In Li Zuofu’s 李祚福 (b. 1979) ironic poem “A bowl” 《一只碗》 China is playfully compared to a food bowl in which many of the scandals that plagued China in recent years are referred to: pyramid schemes, food safety, the Wenzhou High-Speed-Rail disaster, the SARS epidemic, medical impostors, as well workplace accidents: “The hardware factory’s severed finger drops into the bowl, an overcooked / three-meal life”<sup>65</sup>. While

the poem addresses issues touched upon in previous examples, the grotesque imagery and highly sarcastic tone distinguishes the poem from other previously discussed.

To sum up, despite being considered by some critics and readers as vulgar and lacking quality, *dagong* poetry genre has a rich variety in both form and content, and while artistic quality of *dagong* varies from author to author, some *dagong* poets have gained national or even international recognition.

### Conclusion

The paper has explored a plethora of issues centred on *dagong* poetry and its discourse. I started with exploring social aspects related to the genre, demonstrated *dagong* poetry’s position in the course of working class writing in China, provided concise summary of main discussions on politics of naming the genre. Comprehensive analysis of salient features related to *dagong* poetry demonstrated a wide variety of themes and poetic devices employed in this peculiar type of poetic writing.

As an social status-based genre and as a form of “minority literature”, both subject matter and narratological features in *dagong* poems are usually inseparable from its authors social background and life experiences, which most often translates into strong connection between the “I” in the poem and its author. However, as it was demonstrated in the analysis, most esteemed *dagong* poems are written in the way that manage to simultaneously reflect personal and collective experiences of being a rural migrant worker.

In terms of subject matter, the paper surveyed five major themes prevalent in

65 Qin 2016, p. 100.



*dagong* poetry and demonstrated its salient features. In the poems, working conditions on assembly line or construction site often tend to be portrayed as dehumanizing and comparing migrant workers as ants or cogs in the machine are common tropes. Living conditions in urban or suburban setting are similarly depicted as dire and brutal, forming stark contrast to idyllic rural space of narrators' hometowns that are construed as an object of nostalgia.

While usually not considered as being polished or intellectually stimulating, *dagong* poems work as a great social commentary or as a medium subaltern expression, also as identity formation. It can be understood as a certain form of what Benedict Anderson calls an imagined community, in a sense that it is "a deep horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1983, p. 7). It tells stories of China's postsocialist

subaltern class in a way that is starkly different from historical forms of Chinese working class literature such as Republican era left wing intellectual writing or formulaic Maoist worker-peasant-soldier poetry. On the other hand, *dagong* poetry itself constitute a wide and highly heterogeneous body of literature, too complex to be simplified into what van Crevel (2019) refers to as a stereotypical notion, common in Chinese language academic discourse, that *dagong* poetry texts constitute a "dyad of high social significance and low aesthetic value"<sup>66</sup>. While *dagong* poetry can be perceived as highly important historical-documentary evidence for life experiences of the new Chinese precariat, or even as a medium for its community formation, it is important not to overlook its literary value.

66 Van Crevel 2019, p. 89.

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