

# “Workers without Borders:” Envisioning Sociality in Xiao Hai’s Poems

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## Abstract

New worker poetry has emerged as a unique literary voice in contemporary China. This paper places Chinese new workers as the global working class and focuses on the poetics of their global vision. Through a close reading of poems written by Xiao Hai (1980-), one of the prolific worker poets, I argue that the new worker poet constructs global sociality at the levels of aesthetics, social critique, and cultural proposal. Aesthetically, Xiao Hai has borrowed inspiration from classical Chinese poetry, western counter-culture icons, and contemporary avant-garde spirit in his writings on laborers’ ordeals. Global sociality embodies a powerful critique of hierarchical global systems in which laborers are positioned at the bottom. It is also a cultural ideal rooted in revolutionary nostalgia and classical notions, a passionate call for connection among like-minded people, and an awareness of workers’ shared identity. Raising their voices in poetry, Xiao Hai, as well as other worker poets, actively explore opportunities to make their voices heard on a broader scale.

## Keywords

Chinese migrant worker poetry, global underclass, new worker poetry, Xiao Hai, global vision, sociality, borderless

Our humble bones in China, Vietnam, Turkey, and Brazil stick out one by one, as silent as metal. After all, there are 7 billion people worldwide, and fewer than one in ten thousand have the chance to speak out and be heard. Those silent souls! What will they say when they can finally speak?<sup>1</sup>

Chen Nianxi (2017)

The above-quoted passage is from Chen Nianxi 陈年喜(1970–), who gave a talk at New York University in 2016. Chen was a demolition laborer working at a depth of 5,000 meters underground. Years of exposure to toxic dust damaged his lungs, and he was diagnosed with pneumoconiosis. Chen has been writing poetry since the 1990s. He is one of many Chinese migrant worker poets who write from construction sites, assembly lines, and coal mines.

Chen’s speech and his life experience are symbolic on two levels. First, Chen realized that Chinese migrant workers are part of a voiceless global working class. Second, Chen was connected to global literary events and working-class communities through poetry writing and sharing. He gave speeches at Harvard, Yale,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

and New York University. He read his poems at the San Francisco Labor Festival.<sup>2</sup> He participated in the Global Migrant Festival in Singapore and communicated with his global counterparts.

Chen's poetry tour in the U.S. was largely due to a documentary titled *The Verse of Us* 我的诗篇 (*Wo de shipian*, 2015) directed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue. The documentary follows migrant worker poets and their poems. Qin Xiaoyu also compiled an anthology with the same title. In his ambitious undertaking of workers' writings, he introduces worker poets as follows:

The worker poets resemble traditional Chinese "itinerant intellectuals," leaving their homes to seek a livelihood in the cities, concealed at the bottom of society, undergoing the hardships of their trade. Unlike others in the same situation, these poets have a conscious desire to write; and unlike traditional literati or contemporary intellectuals, they frequently must make their living doing something they despise. In their writings, they tend not to be concerned with grand, abstract issues and their language is typically not highly refined; but they come from a particular and important angle, which combined with their rich personal experiences, can paint a powerful picture of lives that few readers know. (2016, pp.19-20)

Qin confirms the worker poets' literary contribution by comparing them with traditional itinerant Chinese intellectuals. Yet his comment that worker poets tend not to touch on "grand, abstract issues" does not fully address the complexity of this social group and their poetry writing. Though many worker poets do focus on very specific, tangible aspects of labor and migration, they also have a very acute cultural and political awareness of their positionality in a broader global context.

This paper reads new worker poetry as a literary voice locally rooted and globally connected. I adopt the term "new worker" 新工人 (*xin gongren*) to refer to contemporary Chinese migrant workers.<sup>3</sup> Through a close reading of poems written by Xiao Hai 小海 (1980-), one of the prolific worker poets, I argue that the new worker poet constructs global sociality at the levels of aesthetics, social critique, and cultural proposal. In the work poets' own words, "workers under the heaven are one family" 天下打工是一家 (*tianxia dagong shi yijia*), and they envision "workers without borders" 工人无国界 (*gongren wu guojie*).

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The global sociality suggests a sense of borderless-ness across geographical, national, and cultural boundaries. It reflects aesthetic creativity: Xiao Hai has borrowed inspiration from classical Chinese poetry, western counter-culture icons, and contemporary avant-garde spirit in his writings on laborers' realities. It embodies a keen awareness of shared identity and a sharp critique of hierarchical global systems that place laborers at the lowest rung. It also functions as a cultural ideal: laborers, wherever they are, belong to an imagined big "family;" they have a strong aspiration for connection and a commitment to social justice.

<sup>2</sup> Chen gave the presentations at the Labor Festival and the San Francisco Living Wage Coalition, an organization fighting for economic justice. The information of the labor festival can be found at [www.laborfest.net](http://www.laborfest.net). Information about Coalition can be accessed via <http://www.livingwage-sf.org/who-we-are/>. For details of the poetry reading events, see Laborvideo (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Scholars have adopted different terms to address Chinese migrant workers and their poetry. *Dagong* Poetry is one commonly used phrase. Maghiel van Crevel (2017, 2019b) uses the term "battlers poetry."

<sup>4</sup> "Workers under the heaven are one family" is the title of a song written by Sun Heng in 2004. It is also displayed on the gate of Workers' Home, a community center in Picun, a village located on the outskirts of Beijing. Worker-poet Wu Yan brought up the idea of "workers without borders" at the 2020 Global Migrant Festival held in Singapore.

I first situate new worker poets as the global working class on the social, political, and cultural periphery. Because of such positionality, their poetry embodies multiple tensions and negotiations between global and local, center and periphery, city and countryside, elites and subalterns, and self and other. I will then focus on poems written by Xiao Hai. In his poetic narratives, Xiao Hai actively critiques the impact of globally sustained social inequality on local laborers and enthusiastically envisions self-empowerment through the creation of a laborers' community.

### Situating Chinese new workers as global working class

Globalization comes at different institutional levels. The “high-end” globalization, or “globalization from above,” refers to the circulation of global capital and products initiated by established institutions such as transnational companies. The “low-end” globalization encompasses the flow of people and goods through informal or semi-illegal channels. While multinational corporations such as Apple or Walmart make profits beyond geographic and national borders, people from developing regions, such as African traders in Guangzhou or illegal immigrants living at Chunking Mansions in Hong Kong, engage in globalization at a much lower level.<sup>5</sup> Though the terms, “high end” and “low end,” are imbedded in institutionalized hierarchy and economic disparity, they speak to different flows of capital and labor worldwide. In reality, the two are deeply intertwined.

Chinese new workers belong to neither the “high” nor “low” end categories of globalization, though they are *locally* labeled as the “low-end population” (*diduan renkou*) and cleared away from big metropolises.<sup>6</sup> Rather, they are caught in between: they are at the low end of global assembly lines bought by institutionalized “high-end” globalization. They are the global working class who live on the socioeconomic margins.

The social marginality is reflected in their labeling: *nongmin gong* 农民工 (peasant worker) and *xin gongren* (new worker). The former implies migrant workers' connection to their rural origins, and the latter suggests a new belonging in industrial cities. Many migrant workers dislike the term “peasant worker” because of its undertone of second-class citizenship.<sup>7</sup> They want to redefine their identity by endorsing a new label, *xin gongren*, which can better address their reality: most of them have left their rural hometowns behind and make a living in cities; their jobs already have nothing to do with the rural. Wang Hui 汪辉 (2013), Lü Tu 吕途 (2013), and Zhang Zhiyu 张之瑜 (2019) have detailed arguments on the “newness” of workers: their identity related to global capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization, their migration from rural to urban, their sense of nonbelonging to any particular places, and their marginalized position in general. This kind of in-betweenness has been expressed in a poem written by worker-poet Tian

<sup>5</sup> For detailed discussions on “low-end globalization,” see Gordon Mathews, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, and Carlos Alba Vega (2012) and Gordon Mathews and Yang Yang (2012).

<sup>6</sup> In 2017, a fire broke out in a residential building in a suburb of Beijing. The residents of the building were mostly migrant workers. This led to the municipal government's removal of migrant workers from residential areas and the city. They are “low end” in the sense that they do low-income jobs in the city. Detailed reports can only be found in overseas reports. For instance, Chu Bailiang (2017) recorded the event in a report titled “Beijing Quzhu wailai wugongzhe.”

<sup>7</sup> Worker singer Xu Duo 许多 stated clearly his rejection of the name *nongmin gong* (Global Migrant Festival 2020a). Lü Tu 吕途 (2013), in her book *Zhongguo xingongren: mishi yu jueqi*, argues that *xin gongren* is a more accurate term as it refers to the new status of workers: some were born into the families of migrant workers who have resided in the cities for years.

Xiaoyin 田晓隐 (1985–) (2016, p.189), “I Use Nails and Screws to Fix China’s Deficiencies” 我用钉子螺丝悬疑中国短板 (Wo yong dingzi luosi xuanyi zhongguo duanban).

我不是国家工人, 也不是农民

I am not a Chinese worker, and I am not a farmer

我是一个悬疑者的身份

my status is that of a man held in suspense

在南方, 一隅, 某个小工厂  
拧螺丝, 打钉子

doing an odd job here and there in the south.  
tightening screws, pounding nails.

The lines, narrated in the worker-poet’s voice, specify migrant workers’ sense of rootlessness, which is also echoed in Xiao Hai’s poetic lines: “The city that I cannot stay in, and the countryside that I cannot return to” (2017, p.73). The sense of “suspense” denotes workers’ position on the socioeconomic periphery.

The socioeconomic periphery is reflected in their changing status in the public realm, namely, from being the “masters” 主人 (*zhuren*) in the socialist period to the underclass 底层 (*diceng*) in the post-socialist era. While Spivak ([1985] 2015) observed voiceless subalterns, the colonial population who are socially and politically excluded, or a lack of institutional recognition of their voices in India, the contemporary Chinese underclass has historically maintained a different relationship with the state power. In the socialist era, the state assumed a proletarian voice by enabling the “telling bitterness” practice 诉苦 (*suku*).<sup>8</sup> Peasants and workers were mobilized to articulate their bitter stories and traumatic pasts to denounce the old regime in the grand narrative of the new nation. In the neoliberal period, the underclass narrative is further complicated by multiple players of the state, capitalistic cooperation, cultural elites, the urban middle class, and transnational intellectuals, who all try to speak on behalf of the working class.<sup>9</sup>

While different social players attempt to speak for migrant workers, the inevitable epistemic violence (Spivak [1985] 2015) places them as culturally marginalized others. Migrant workers have been trying to speak for themselves in their own voice. *Dagong* poetry 打工诗歌, written by migrant workers, serves as a witness to workers’ experiences of industrial alienation, ecological disaster, physical pain, economic exploitation, and gender violence (Sun 2012, 2014, 2015; Gong 2021, 2012). Acknowledging the significance of *dagong* poetry as a political intervention, Wanning Sun (2014, p. 216) points out: “(I)t is an area characterized by intense politics of cultural brokering and cultural capital,” and “most *dagong* poets seem more interested in gaining institutional acceptance than in reaching the fellow workers their poetry seeks to represent.” Sun’s sharp critique exposes the intricate relationship between the underclass and the establishment, especially that of cultural elites.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Gail Hershatter (1993) and Wanning Sun (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Wanning Sun (2014: 37) has observed: “The state, capital, international NGOs, and transnational cultural elites all want to speak on behalf of China’s rural migrant workers.” In the 2010s, the yearly Spring Festival Gala on CCTV included migrant workers in the program. The business-sponsored TV programs, such as “China Got Talent” (达人秀 *Daren xiu*), had peasants tell their stories of their struggles and dreams. The above-mentioned Qin Xiaoyu’s documentary on migrant workers is another example.

The following development of new workers' cultural activities, nevertheless, suggests a more diversified spectrum. New workers *are* seeking institutional recognition by attending TV shows or working with official institutions such as the Women's Federation.<sup>10</sup> Federico Picerni (2024) has argued that the social marginality of migrant workers influences their understanding and writing of the urban, and the capitalization of such marginality promotes their visibility. Nevertheless, they have also been actively developing multiple cultural forms to speak out, claim their agency, and reach out to their peers. As Chunchun Ting (2023) puts it, they are "unlikely writers" who attempt to redefine literature and politics through both collective activity and individual endeavor. Take Picun 皮村, a village on the outskirts of Beijing, as an example. Migrant workers reside in this area located between the city and the countryside. They have created their own literary group and inaugurated a literary journal titled *New Workers' Literature* 新工人文学 (Xin gongren wenxue). They organized the New Workers Art Troupe and established the Migrant Workers' Culture and Arts Museum. They built a community center named Migrant Workers' Home. They initiated the New Workers Art Festival and New Workers Spring Festival Gala. The Museum's gate displays a message: "Without our culture, we have no history. Without our history, we have no future."<sup>11</sup> The message reflects workers' aspiration to narrate their own stories, in their own voice, and to construct their own subjectivity.

The aspiration is also reflected in the title of a song written by worker-poet and singer Sun Heng in 2004: "Workers under the Heaven are One Family" 天下打工是一家 (tianxia dagong shi yijia). *Tianxia* 天下, which can be translated as "all under heaven," is a loaded, fluid term. In the Chinese classics, it is a cosmological imagination of the world. It can be secular, material, mythical, or metaphysical in different intellectual traditions such as legalism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Spatially, it could refer to the central land (中原 zhongyuan) as well as regions beyond the boundary of a single state. In the modern and contemporary eras, *tianxia* has acquired a geopolitical dimension. Intellectuals have turned to the classical concept for different cultural agendas. Liberals evoked the term to question narrow-minded nationalism, and leftists proposed *tianxiaism* as a different universalism to resist the Western concept of globalization.<sup>12</sup> New workers develop their own vision by drawing on the classical and intellectual concept of "under the heaven." This vision represents their cultural awareness and a call for connection across borders. They view new workers as belonging to one "family," united by shared experiences of labor and migration. Building on the idea that "workers under the heaven are one family," Wu Yan, another worker-poet, introduced the notion of "workers without borders" when he attended the poetry reading at the 2020 Global Migrant Festival in Singapore (Global Migrant Festival, 2020b). The Festival was participated by migrant workers from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma, and more. They read their poems, performed songs, and discussed the challenges faced by migrant workers. "Workers without borders" takes on a global dimension in this context. It addresses an alternative global sociality, which is deeply connected to yet highly critical of the institutionalized neoliberal globalization. It is a cultural vision of global laborers' shared identity, community, and agency.

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<sup>10</sup> Some migrant workers participated in TV shows and worked with the All-China Women's Federation. For instance, Chen Nianxi participated in *Shige zhiwang* 诗歌之王 (King of Poetry), in which he teamed up with Luo Zhongxu 罗中旭, a pop singer. Fan Yusu also worked with *Zhongguo funü bao* 中国妇女报 (China Women's News).

<sup>11</sup> I borrowed the English translation from Maghie van Crevel, for details, see Van Crevel (2019a). The museum, however, was closed in 2023. I will discuss this at the end of the paper.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed argument on the concepts of *tianxia*, see Ban Wang, ed., (2017), Feng Lan (2008) and William A Callahan (2007).

How is this global sociality imagined and constructed in new worker poetry? In what way is it connected to but critical of globalization from “above?” How does it function as a cultural ideal at the grassroots level? What does it say about the cultural or even political consciousness of new workers caught at the intersection of global production and local development? To explore the embedded politics, I will focus on Xiao Hai and his poems, with reference to other new worker poets.

### Global sociality as aesthetic creativity

In 2017, the Picun literary group published a special issue on Xiao Hai’s poem collection titled *Gongchang de haojiao* 工厂的嚎叫 (Howl in the Factory), a direct reference to Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl.” Born in Henan Province, Xiao Hai has been writing hundreds of poems while he migrates from city to city. Poetry, for him, is his personal resistance. In “A Short Poem to Resist the World” 用一首短诗去抵抗世俗 (Yong yishou duanshi qu dikang sisu [3281-282]), he writes:

我所有的尊严都靠在温饱线卑微	all my dignity shrinks on the subsistence level
我所有的梦想都临在触碰中破碎	all my freedom drips bound in drifting
我所有的自由都淌在漂泊里捆绑	all my freedom is confined to my drifting life
当三月匆匆地流走	as March fast flows away
我只用一首短诗去抵抗世俗	I remain with nothing but a short poem to resist the world <sup>13</sup>

When youth, hope, love, dignity, dreams, and freedom are imprisoned in endless sweatshop labor, the poet turns to poetry writing to express his defiance.

The resistance in poetry is located in everyday reality. Xiao Hai, like most other laborer poets, focuses on the seemingly insignificant every day of laborers. Among his working-class peers, to give a few examples, Chen Nianxi writes about missing his “son,” who lives thousands of miles away. Xie Xiangnan 谢湘南 gives a seemingly nonchalant account of the “work accident joint investigative report.” Wu Xia 巫霞 narrates ironing a “sundress.” Ni Wen 倪文 presents a detailed account of “filling out job applications.” Xiao Hai reflects on “being the son of a peasant.”<sup>14</sup> By describing mundane daily life in poetry, new workers engage intensively in making sense of their reality. In “A Scrub Worker Living in Zhengzhou,” Xiao Hai follows a scrub worker who loses his previous job due to the dismantling of formerly state-owned enterprises. Rendering the daily routine of vending watermelons in Xinjiang, selling insurance in Shenzhen, and rubbing towels in Zhengzhou in poetic form, Xiao Hai reveals the impact of institutional change on individuals.

Xiao Hai also places everyday reality on a broad scale and reflects on the past, present, and future. In “To Us in This Great Era” 致伟大时代中的我们 (Zhi weida shidai Zhong de wenmen [352]), he describes how people play with their phones, flow with daily routines, and become “industrial replicas.” Such soulless existence constitutes the “great time.” In “Retrospection on Today Two Hundred Years Later” 两百年后看今天 (Liangbainian hou kan jintian [339]), the poet gives a long list of trivialities: rain, flood,

<sup>13</sup> The poem is translated by Federico Picerni. For details, see Xiao Hai, “A Short Poem to Resist the World.”

<sup>14</sup> All the phrases in quotation marks are the titles of the workers’ poems.

drought, typhoon, Internet influencer, explosion, countryside, city, field, and factory. Dreams fade away in such an endless succession of days and nights: this is how people in the future will view today. In “The Silent Majority” 沉默的大多数 (Chenmo de daduoshu [383]), Xiao Hai uses the imagery of ants and grass to signify the voiceless: his neighbor who dies for no reason, his co-worker who loses one arm, a divorcing woman who cries without tears, and himself. They all live in a seemingly beautiful world.

To express his resistance, Xiao Hai draws artistic inspiration from Chinese and Western poetry and pop culture. The frustration and unfulfilled yearning in his poem “Seeing Sunset Again” 又见黄昏 (you jian huanghun [62]) were triggered by Cui Jian’s rock songs.<sup>15</sup> “Embracing the Yangtze River, Riding Wind and Waves” 怀抱长江，乘风破浪 (huai bao Changjiang, Chengfeng polang [102]) is a tribute to Haizi. “I Have a Dream” 我有一个梦想 (Wo you yige mengxiang [110]) and “I Dream One Day” 我梦想着有一天 (Wo mengxiang zhe you yitian [111]) echo Martin Luther King’s speech. “Give True Love a Chance” 给真爱一个机会 (Gei zhenai yige jihui [155]) derives its title from John Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance.” “Hi, Mr. Van Gogh” 嗨，梵高先生 (Hai, Fangao xiansheng [157]) is related to Bob Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Xiao Hai acknowledged that Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan have given him “strength” (*liliang*) in his poetry writing (Global Migrant Festival, 2020c). The anti-establishment and counterculture temperament of these cultural icons set the passionate tone in many of Xiao Hai’s poems when he delves into the social injustice new workers cope with.

The poem titled “Freedom” 自由 (Ziyou [147-149]) bridges western counter-culture spirit and classical Chinese poetry. With its title in English, the poem follows the format and theme of “Dignity” written by Bob Dylan. In a romantic tone, the poet describes his search for freedom in the south and north, in the bustling market, at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, on top of the Himalaya, under the sun and stars, and in every corner of cities. The romantic tone of searching also echoes the classical journey in Qu Yuan’s (340 BCE–278 BCE) poem “Encountering Sorrow” 离骚 (Lisao). With rich imagery, similes, and metaphors, both poems describe persistent quests and disenchanting disillusion. In Qu Yuan’s rendering, the poet embarks on a mythical journey to heaven, earth, mountains, and rivers to seek his ideals in vain. Xiao Hai, on the other hand, gives an ironic twist: the passionate search results in the discovery of a golden credit card:

我穿过荒凉的戈壁来到一片草原	Crossing the desolate Gobi Desert, I arrived at a grassland
遇上天使和魔鬼的女儿	I came across the daughter of an angel and a devil
就坐在受到惊吓而奔跑的马头上 衣着华丽 眼神迷惘	Lavishly dressed and confused, she sat on the head of a freighted running horse
我乘着洁白的云朵如同乘着床头的墙壁	I rode on the white clouds as if I were riding on the wall of my bed
若有所思的对着咀嚼的羊群	facing the chewing sheep, I lost in thought
一无所获的领悟着	Nothing came to my mind
那不知道是谁曾说过的关于自由的话	I didn’t remember who once talked about freedom

<sup>15</sup> Xiao Hai acknowledged the impact of Cui Jian on this particular poem. He resonated with the repressed yearning, aspiration, and frustration expressed in Cui’s songs. For details, see Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 62.

有人拿着金卡在眼前一甩  
说那里面都是自由

Someone threw a golden credit card in front of my  
eyes  
saying that is freedom

The combination of an idealistic search and what has been found creates a sense of absurdity, satirizing the monetization of a political ideal.

Xiao Hai's aesthetic creativity goes beyond the borders of genres and nations. Maghiel van Crevel (2019b) has observed that Xiao Hai's poems blur the boundaries of migrant worker poetry and avant-garde poetry; the poet combines world literature and engages with local issues. He not only turns to literary resources, but also assimilates energy from pop culture, rock music, and the civil rights movement in the United States. Blending different resources, Xiao Hai delves into an examination of hierarchical global systems that shape workers' realities.

### Global sociality embodied in the social critique

The global sociality in Xiao Hai's poetic narratives is twofold: a strong critique of systematic inequality and an enthusiastic call for world unity among the working class. While Xiao Hai identifies with the counter-culture spirit of Western cultural and civil rights figures, he is also aware that his tie with the West is mostly built on his physical labor of producing goods for transnational consumers, as his poem "Chinese Workers" clearly mentions. On the one hand, he has suspicions about the grand schemes of revolutions, be they political or industrial, as neither can really "save" laborers. On the other hand, he constantly employs revolutionary imagery and discourse to call for workers' self-empowerment and solidarity. Full of paradox, the global sociality in his poetic narratives critically exposes the reality of the contemporary working class.

Drifting in different cities to make a living, many new workers, such as Xu Lizhi 许立志, Guo Fuhai 郭福海 and Li Ruo 李若, write on topics of home, homelessness, and alienation. Federico Picerni (2020, 147) argues that such poetic exploration is "the subjective representation of the social space of the city." Xiao Hai extends the problem of homelessness: he sees himself as an orphan of the world. In "Thinking of My Motherland" 就在某刻强烈地想起祖国 (Jiu zai mouke qianglie de xiangqi zuguo [354-355]), he wrote:

妈妈 请你再次告诉我哪里是东方  
告诉我太阳是在哪边升起  
我怎么总也看不到前方的道路  
我不相信是他们蒙住了我的眼  
妈妈 我听说这里的山河是一片秀丽

Mom, please tell me again where is the east  
where the sun rises from  
How come I cannot see my path ahead  
I don't believe they have blindfolded me  
Mom, I heard mountains and rivers are  
gorgeous  
I deeply love each inch of the land  
But one day I have to leave you behind, along  
with my persistence  
for survival, for my humble livelihood  
Nevertheless, there is no home wherever I go

我如此深爱着每一寸土地  
可当某天我为了卑微的生存  
却不得不丢掉倔强离你而去  
可走到哪里都没有一个家园

就像是一个满世界流浪的孤儿

Like an orphan, I drift around the world

The poet outpours his emotion of disorientation. Burdened with a “humble livelihood,” he fails to find any direction or home.

The sense of disorientation and homelessness derives from historically and globally preserved inequality in power, resources, and social status. In “Chinese prayers” 中国祈祷(Zhongguo qidao [188-189]), the poet configures a hierarchical society with a sharp disparity between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. While wealthy individuals pray for greater profits, the lower class simply hopes to meet their basic needs for survival. In “It is Alright, Motherland” 这很好, 祖国 (Zhe henhao, Zuguo [159-163]), Xiao Hai first paints a panoramic picture of disillusionment, confusion, fear, and frustration, and then points out the root of emotional unrest: workers occupy the lowest tier in global systems:

活着的惯性思维麻木着你  
让你苟延残喘着曲解了生命的意义

让你在奔向罗马的大道上折途返回  
而去往埃及金字塔底做一粒沙子

一粒受法老施咒的屈辱沙子

The sense of survival makes you numb  
You misunderstand the meaning of life while  
you struggle to make ends meet  
You return from the path to Rome  
and become a grain of sand at the bottom of the  
Pyramid in Egypt  
a humiliated grain of sand cursed by Pharaoh

Symbols of past empires’ glory, Rome, the Pyramid, and Pharaoh exemplify historical establishment in various civilizations. The historically sustained oppression persists today. Migrant workers are as humble as grains of sand, insignificant and disposable.

Xiao Hai is not the only worker poet who discloses Chinese laborers’ reality as part of global problems. The above-mentioned Chen Nianxi sees metals coming from his explosive work in the Empire State Building in New York City (“Empire State Building”). Sun Haitao realizes the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on him and his workmates (“Machine Documentation”). Zheng Xiaoqiong gives outcries of the global south (“Industrial Age”). Xu Lizhi packages industrial products, along with his youthful dreams, and sends them to the other shore of the ocean (“Laborer”). The global vision, in the narratives of the working class, lays bare the systematic inequality.

Facing the inequality caused by global industrialization and consumption, Xiao Hai questions revolutions, which claim to change the world and make it a better place. In “Chinese workers” (中国工人, Zhongguo gongren [43-45]), the term “revolution” carries two connotations. One refers to the social revolution, as seen in phrases such as “revolutionary comrade” and “October Revolution,” and the other to the (second) Industrial Revolution. Both connect Chinese workers to the outside world, yet neither could offer them a decent standard of living. The social revolution has failed to save workers, for they continue to struggle for survival. The Industrial Revolution, on the other hand, places workers on global assembly lines and alienates them. The poet expresses his suspicion of both in the following lines:

我是一名中国工人

I am a Chinese worker

在钢筋水泥的欲望大楼里圈养着我们的廉价青春	Lurking inside the desire of tall mansions in steel and concrete is our captive cut-price youth
春夏秋冬的变迁不属于我们	The changes of the season are not ours
粮食和蔬菜也不再需要我们关心	Food and vegetables don't need our attention
我们所能做的只是将 Made in china 的神秘字符疯狂流淌到四大洋 和七大洲的每条河流与街道的中心	All we can do is let the mystery of the words Made in China Fiercely flood every river leading to the four oceans and seven continents And at every intersection
再用那十月革命后所带来的战利品来换取一张张年关将近时想要归家的票根	Take the spoils of the October Revolution To exchange for much sought-after ticket stubs to return home at year's end <sup>16</sup>

“Tall mansions in steel,” symbols of urbanization and industrialization, wipe out nature and confine youth. “Food and vegetables,” a reference to Haizi’s poetic lines, <sup>17</sup> epitomizes everyday living, a luxury beyond the reach of most workers, whose lives are dominated by producing industrial goods exported globally.

Trapped locally in factories, Xiao Hai looks beyond the immediate reality and questions the industrial and political institutions that sustain it. His poems outline the position of the Chinese laborers on the global machinery of production, revealing a sharp awareness of the oppression and exploitation he and his fellow workmates endure.

### Global sociality as a cultural ideal

Awareness of global systematic inequality leads to an aspiration for social justice. Though Xiao Hai distrusts institutionalized revolutions, he nevertheless turns to revolutionary concepts to shape his vision of an equal society. While the poetic imagination of an ideal society embodies classical notions of harmony and unity, community building in reality is a down-to-earth practice and is deeply connected to various social groups within and across national boundaries.

In “The Long March of Chinese New Workers” 中国新工人的长征路 (Zhongguo gongren de xin changzheng lu [382]), Xiao Hai uses the poetic devices of repetition and antithesis to voice his emotions of defiance, wrath, and aspiration:

我们需要个毛泽东

We need Mao Zedong

<sup>16</sup> The poem is translated by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho. For details, see Xiao Hai, “Chinese workers.”

<sup>17</sup> While Haizi (1964-1989), the avant-garde poet, writes “From tomorrow onwards, care for grain and vegetables” in his widely-known poem “Mianchao dahai, chunnuan huakai” 面朝大海，春暖花开 (Facing the sea, with spring blossoms), Xiao Hai takes an opposite direction: “Food and vegetables don’t need our attention”.

需要他带领着我们走  
走那条路 走那条路  
我们不需要秦始皇 不需要兵马俑

也没那么需要一道这样的长城  
自己命运自己做主  
我们不要被污染了的河流  
不要被扭曲了的灵魂  
要用劳动换来的真正幸福生活  
而不是机器和偏见  
要天下为公  
要世界大同  
要世界大同

We need him to lead us  
walking that way, walking that way  
We do not need Emperor Qin, or the  
Terracotta Army  
We do not need the Great Wall  
We need to take charge of our own destiny  
We do not need polluted rivers  
nor distorted souls  
We want to exchange labor for a real happy life  
not machine, nor prejudice  
We want the world to belong to all  
We want the world with grand unity  
We want the world with grand unity

There are different kinds of historical references to the grand narratives. The imperial imagery of Emperor Qin, the Terracotta Army, and the Great Wall symbolizes oppression and confinement. The emblematic revolutionary icons of Mao Zedong and the Long March epitomize the contemporary working class' quest for self-determination and self-empowerment. *Tianxia weigong* 天下为公 (the world belongs to all) and *Shijie tatong* 世界大同 (the world with great unity), phrases from the Confucian classic *The Book of Rites* 礼记 (Liji, Han dynasty 202 BCE–220), signify a perfect society. Reformists in the late Qing dynasty and revolutionaries in the 1911 Revolution employed both concepts to address social ills and advocate social change. The concepts become Xiao Hai's imagination of an idealized world that treats everyone with fairness and dignity. He channels his political consciousness into romanticized revolutionary nostalgia and classical ideals.

Such ideals are nevertheless not merely abstract notions. Xiao Hai has found a local working-class community in Picun, which has shifted his attention from his anger to the working class to which he feels he belong. As Maghiel van Crevel (2023) argues, the "I and we" are connected in Xiao Hai's becoming of a poet. In "Brave the Storm to Picun" 穿过暴风骤雨到皮村去 (chuanguo baofeng zhouyu dao Picun qu, 2018), Xiao Hai expresses his belief in the strength of new workers as a united group once the like-minded people come together, despite sinister obstacles:

也许闪电会把天空劈成末日  
也许冰雹要把大地砸成碎泥  
我还是会带着一个工人的真诚与理想  
穿过暴风骤雨到皮村去  
去吧 去吧  
穿越暴风骤雨到皮村去  
那里有花和花  
草和草

Maybe lightning will split the sky, turning it  
into a doomsday  
Maybe hail will smash the earth into pieces  
I will still bring the sincerity and ideals of a  
worker  
braving the storm to Picun  
Let's go, let's go!  
Brave the storm to Picun,  
where flowers and flowers  
grass and grass

山河与山河	mountains and rivers
云朵与云朵	clouds and clouds
自然而然的最好相遇	come together naturally and beautifully

The imagery of lightning, doomsday, hail, and storms denotes the ordeals workers endure and the challenges they overcome. The metaphors of flowers, grass, rivers, mountains, and clouds suggest the beauty of getting together. Picun, in the poetic narrative, becomes a destination where new workers connect with one another. A sense of hope and strength arises when people build a community at the local level.

In community building, poetry has indeed played a crucial role in engaging new workers in dialogue with other social groups both within and outside China. Worker writers and poets formed the Picun literary group in 2014. They gathered regularly and read their works together. They invited university professors and volunteers to teach classes and lead discussions on writing. Their literary engagement has drawn attention from different regions. Fan Yusu (2020, 1-2), a well-known worker writer, wrote that they have met “friends from all over the world” and scholars of different countries.<sup>18</sup> The journal, *New Workers' Literature*, has made a conscious effort to include narratives of global subalterns. A special column named “New Workers Overseas” (*haiwai xin gongren*) introduces overseas laborer writers and stories of Chinese workers who migrate to other countries. Beyond the local level, worker poets also establish direct connections with global migrant workers by participating in international poetry workshops and festivals. Xiao Hai, for instance, read his poems “Chinese Workers” and “Youth on the Assembly Line” 流水线上的青春 (*Liushui xianshang de qingchun*) at the 2020 Global Migrant Festival in Singapore. Raising their voices in poetry, Xiao Hai and other worker poets actively explore opportunities to make their voices heard on a broader scale.

## Coda

Xiao Hai, as well as many other new worker poets, writes on the realities of laborers at the low end of global capitalism. His poems display global sociality at the level of aesthetics, social critique, and cultural proposal. He has incorporated poetic inspirations and conventions from China and the West, the past and present, revolutionary and pop cultures. In his poetic narratives, he launched his rigorous critique of institutionalized global inequality. His passionate call for a classical ideal of world harmony and unity appears to be an antidote to the global systems of exploitation. The poet not only goes beyond the national, cultural, temporal, and aesthetic borders to construct his social critique and cultural proposals in his poetry, but he also connects with various social groups, workers and intellectuals alike, to make the voice of the working class heard.

Xiao Hai's encounter with the community in Picun has made him realize it is important for workers to speak out (Wu 2017). His effort has indeed been recognized in the official media. Xinhua Net, the official channel affiliated with Xinhua News Agency, has published articles on Xiao Hai's experience and writings. Nevertheless, the tension between workers and the institutional mainstream persists. In 2023, the Migrant Workers' Culture and Arts Museum located at Picun, a symbol of the new workers' community, was

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. Zhang Huiyu from Peking University, for instance, often teaches there. In *New Workers' Literature*, Fan Yusu (2020, 1-2) wrote: “Because of literature, our literature group has met friends from all over the world: Japan, Singapore, Britain, America, the Netherlands, Italy, and Canada... Scholars from around the world have given positive comments to our literary works.”

disbanded and demolished due to “city planning.”<sup>19</sup> The overarching institutionalized development inevitably engulfs the communal space of new workers. Though the physical space disappeared, the museum has found a new home online: a virtual museum.<sup>20</sup> On the homepage of the virtual museum display the lines that used to be at the gate of the Museum: “Without our culture, we have no history. Without our history, we have no future.” The online “reincarnation,” I argue, extends the Chinese new workers’ voice to another borderless scope. Access to and connection with Chinese new workers’ arts, culture, and history can happen anytime and anywhere. In this sense, the global sociality acquires another dimension: the community of working class crosses the boundary of the physical and virtual, preserving the voice from below, honest, straightforward, and powerful.

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<sup>19</sup> The Xinhua report on Xiao Hai can be found in “Dagong shiren Xiao Hai.” The detailed report on the closing of the museum is covered in the Artforum news, “Dagong yishu bowuguan.”

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