

Zhang, L., ed. (2024) *Asian Workers Stories*. Hardball Press.

Review by Magnus Nilsson

The anthology *Asian Workers Stories* contains fifteen prose texts by working-class writers from Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, China, and Malaysia, several of whom are or have been migrant workers. Ten of these texts are fiction, whereas five are non-fiction testimonies. Most of them describe the plights of workers in different Asian countries today.

The anthology's editor, Chinese literary scholar Luka Lei Zhang, states that her ambition is to make visible Asian working-class literature – as well as the experiences it describes – to a wider audience. But she also promotes a specific interpretation of this literature. Being worried about “the prevailing trend of viewing migrant worker or working-class writers solely through the lens of ‘cultural’ identity,” she emphasizes that the texts collected in *Asian Workers Stories* illuminate workers’ “economic role and the exploitation they endure” in contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, she also wants to “foster connections and solidarity among working-class writers in Asia”

The collected texts are quite diverse. Some are written by quite experienced writers, others by amateurs. Some explicitly describe and criticize workers’ working and living conditions, while others are more personal or poetic.

On one end of the stylistic and thematic spectrum one finds passages like the following, from Zakir Hossain Khokan’s short story “Rain”, which describes a lorry full of migrant workers crashing on a highway in Singapore:

Rames barely had time to crane his neck in the direction of the sound, when he was thrown completely out of the lorry, followed by the other passengers all hitting the road, as the lorry itself became a mangled mess of metal. Rames looked and saw spots of red develop on the bodies of his fellow migrant workers, a revolting shade of red which the rain could not wash from his mind.

On the other end there are lyrical elements, as the following poem which is included in Tari Sasha’s short story “Like a Wounded Senkon” (the name Senkon is an allusion to a poem by Indonesian poet Peri Sandi Huzchi about a farmer by that name who was shot dead by the police in 1965 after having been accused of being a communist):

I am the wounded Sengkon
Try to recall every wound
In the chest
On the back

On the feet
In the coughs
pestered with tuberculosis

Together, the texts give a multi-faceted picture both of class relations and class conflicts in Asia today and of Asian working-class literature. Thereby the anthology makes a most welcome contribution to an important trend in the study of working-class literature.

For a long time, this scholarship was often characterized by a rather narrow national (or even nationalistic) perspective. Scholars in the USA, the UK, Germany etc. focused mainly on working-class literature from their respective countries. Often, they also essentialized it and argued that their analyses had universal reach.

In recent years, however, this approach has been challenged. For example, in *No Country* (2014), Sonali Perera argued that working-class literature should be viewed as a global phenomenon. Thereafter, several volumes comprising scholarship on working-class literature from different national contexts have been published (and more are on the way). They have demonstrated that the differences between working-class literatures from different countries can be quite substantial, and that working-class literature must thus be conceptualized as a highly heterogeneous phenomenon.

Asian Workers Stories contributes to this development. By expanding the archive of working-class literature available to scholars, it challenges established understandings of this literature and thereby functions as a catalyst for thinking about it in new ways.

Zhang envisions the anthology as the beginning of a larger project, hoping that more texts can be translated, collected, and published in the future. That would be most welcome.

Reviewer Bio:

Magnus Nilsson is a professor of comparative literature at Malmö University (Sweden). Working-class literature across media and languages is his main research interest. His English-language publications include the monographs *Literature and Class: Aesthetical-Political Strategies in Modern Swedish Working-Class Literature* (2014), and *Writing Class: Precarious Blue-Collar Labour in Contemporary Swedish Literature* (forthcoming 2025). He is the editor (with John Lennon) of *Working-Class Literature(s): International and Historical Perspectives* (2 Vol. 2017 and 2020) and (with Mike Sanders and Wiktor Marzec) *Transnational Working-Class Literatures* (forthcoming 2025).