

WITNESS AND MEMORY

Few parts of the world, except perhaps Britain during the world's first industrial revolution at the end of the 18th century, have experienced the kind of social and economic transformation which has recently been experienced in China. This development is characterised by population movement from the countryside to the city and from small cities to larger cities. On the one hand, there is the push from the countryside as farm labourers fail to find sufficient work and, on the other, the pull of the cities on young people with aspirations for self-improvement. This explains the particular poignancy of certain poems which have emerged from China in recent years.

In the 1990s a small number of migrant workers began writing as a means of expressing the dehumanising realities of their lives and of their longing for homelands. These poems preserve their memories of rural and spiritual life, as well as bearing witness to the sufferings they endured.

The poet Zheng Xiaoqiong, for example, was born in Sichuan in 1980. After working as a nurse in a rural hospital, she moved to Guangdong province where she worked for several years in different factories including die-casting, toy manufacturing, and as a hole-punch operator in a hardware factory. In her poem 'Living', she gives a graphic picture of the mechanised life experienced on the production line: 'My hands become part of the production line; my body turned into/a contracted object'. She doesn't 'know how to protect a muted life/a life that loses the name and gender' and nostalgic memories of 'moonlight [...] from Sichuan' are 'extinguished in the production lines seven days/a week'. Construction sites were hazardous and worker protection policies non-existent. In Tang Buyu's poem 'Excavator' the imagery is even more brutal: 'In the morning, the rain stopped/An excavator tore open the wet turf/You felt as if your body was being penetrated too'.

Exhaustion, occupational sickness and death were endemic. Accidents at work caused nightmares as in Mo Xiaoxian's poem 'Porter': 'Once, he carried a workmate who fell from the tower crane/The memory of splashed brain wakes him many nights'.

Alongside distress and tragedy is a sense of impotence and shame at the workers' own complicity in the system, as Shen Yu exemplifies in 'Huge Machine': 'A sense of comedy and a glib tongue create nothing but machine slogans/Machines are the results of barbarousness and rely on prestige, especially order.' Zhu Ziqing takes this further in 'The Law of Machines': 'When I said this, I didn't know that I was becoming a machine/And that what I said was not me but the machine talking'. In 'Motherland' Fan Zi sums up a profound unease and poses a moral question: 'My motherland, you have your triumphs and losses/with dignity I own, you should also have timidity and shame'.

Other poems reflect the stark distinction between the city melting-pot and the desolate empty village. Yang Ke's 'Railway Station' for example: 'Here the stomach of the metropolis absorbs the new and purges the old' where 'A shepherd who wants to get rich [...] begins to taste the loneliness of crowds'. Contrasted to this we have Lu Chunchao's hometown village in 'The Fact Is': 'A mountain, a village/A bottle of spirits, a window lit up by a candle [...] These may be all a villager's life is about'.

In the 1990s millions of workers departed their homelands to find work in an economy developing as a free-market system. As private enterprise became more dominant, people in state-run industries vanished into the world of an underclass. They were 'stabbed by their dreams' as Chen Huiling writes in her short poem 'Disappearing' about a middle-aged worker: 'The elevator descends, the colleague who lost his job/disappears in front of the building'. With a vivid simile she conveys the general scene of desolation: 'The leaves on the ground [...] decaying like his career/and the declining industry'.

Many poets remember lonely childhoods when parents left them with relatives and when generation gaps became gulfs: 'Mum, the place where dad was headed for was as far off as the word Father' (Meng Hui, 'Snow in 1992'). In another poem, Meng laments that his own young daughter won't know what snow is and that she will learn a different dialect as she grows into the new future ('Inland Immigrants'). In 'Break', by An Lianquan, the chicken eggs his grandmother carried in a jar for many miles in order to sell them for his school bus fare, become a metaphor for life: the old house where they once lived together 'like an abandoned eggshell after hatching,/which is silent and vulnerable/like life itself, that always starts with an egg'.

While this collection focuses on migrant Chinese workers, it may be seen as representative of the uncertainties all peoples of the world experience in an age of urbanisation, globalisation and a new technology. Xie Guangua's poem 'In the City' highlights hierarchical extremes further eroding the sense of community among workers: 'Wealth, fame, position, endless desires/Miracles come to the stage one by one, but behind the vanity fair/men in shreds and patches are wandering,/tears of frustration, melancholy and sorrow fall'. In his long poem 'Ithaca on a Sunday', Lv Bubu 'walks through buildings absent-mindedly/Meditating on the mystery between death and existence'. He meets a media woman: 'She has an almighty financial world' who declares 'writing poems is getting absurd in a gradual manner'. While 'The Internet Park is upgraded to Luohu Silicon Valley', Lv Bubu 'is convinced that/only people close to nature can/possess a pure heart underneath their rotting look'.

Yang Ke, the first poet featured in the collection, is a major representative poet of folk writings. In his poem 'Great Migration', Yang Ke begins with a quote from the Redwater River Planning Report 1, which testifies to the relocation of 240 000 inhabitants in order to construct ten hydropower stations. The poem ends with a reference to the mythical figure Buloto and, for me, reads like a grief-stricken tribute that implicitly heralds a new beginning, perhaps new hope.

Descendants of Buloto
Following the course of Redwater River
In the direction
Of a requiem
They go forward

While I have touched on only a few of the poems and themes in the anthology, and have not referred to poets' different ethnic minorities and languages as mentioned in the biographies, I hope this brief foreword might offer a flavour of the general tone. There is no sentimentality here. The poems testify to courage and despair. In the many references to other poetries and to nature and the spiritual world, there is a sense of history and timelessness, of endurance and a refusal to forget.

Lucy Hamilton, January 2018