

Beyond the Overlooked Rural Narrative in Chinese Migrant Worker Literature:

On Liang Hong's and Sun Huifen's works

I SHUANG LIU is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Area Studies at Leiden University, Matthias de Vrieshof 3, 2311 BZ, Leiden, The Netherlands (ccliushuang@gmail.com).

ABSTRACT: The focus of literary works about Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers is often on their urban experience, in which they are mostly portrayed as a socially disadvantaged group and a deviant presence in urban life. The reader less frequently encounters a complementary *rural* narrative on migrant workers' experience of their native countryside. This is remarkable, since the countryside holds demonstrable importance for migrant workers, and studying the associated rural narrative is essential for understanding the intricacies and diversity of the migrant worker experience as a whole. By closely reading two literary texts, Liang Hong's nonfictional *China in One Village: The Story of One Town and the Changing World* (2010), and Sun Huifen's novel *Jikuan's Carriage* (2007), this paper shows the complex connection between migrant workers and the countryside, adding a key element to our understanding of this much discussed demographic, its literary representations, and of subaltern cultural production in general.

KEYWORDS: Chinese literature, migrant workers, rurality, structure of feeling, subaltern cultural production.

Introduction

Ever since the onset of China's rapid modernisation and urbanisation in the 1980s, hundreds of millions of farmers have flocked from the countryside to the cities in search of jobs. They are China's internal migrant workers, also known as “打工 *dagong*” people in Chinese (*dagong zhe* 打工者). *Dagong*, which can be translated as “working for the boss,” as in selling one's labour, is a term used to describe farmers from rural areas who travel to cities to work precarious manual jobs that require long hours but offer low compensation. Although migrant workers or *dagong* people are the primary drivers of China's economic growth, they are not always its beneficiaries. Many of them live and work in deplorable conditions and are denied fundamental civil rights because of their lack of urban household registration (*hukou* 户口). At the same time, they are a socially disadvantaged group that is widely seen as “backward,” as a deviant presence in urban life, and potentially a source of social unrest (Florence 2006, 2007). These views are in evidence in various ways in government policy, media, and social science discourse on migrant workers (Wang 2017; Guo 2019).

Literary works that reflect the *dagong* experience have emerged

in the Pearl River Delta region since the 1980s, when the first wave of migrant workers began to arrive in the newly designated special economic zones. Shenzhen cultural official Yang Honghai 楊宏海 was among the first commentators to take note of this literary phenomenon, and proposed the concept of “migrant worker literature” (*dagong wenxue* 打工文學).¹

The definition of migrant worker literature has always been controversial. Some critics such as Yang (1992) and Sun (2012a, 2012b) argue that only works by writers with firsthand migrant worker experience qualify as migrant worker literature, emphasising the broadly sociopolitical nature of the genre and its role as authentic testimony. Others such as Liu D. (2012) and Jiang L. (2008) hold that the genre should be defined by subject matter and literary aesthetic standards, regardless of the author's personal background. I find the latter approach more useful, since what I am interested in is how migrant workers are *represented* in literature rather than the authors' life stories per se. That said, authorship issues are still significant,

1. Migrant worker literature is also referred to as “*dagong* literature” (Sun 2012a; Dooling 2017) or “battler literature” (van Crevel 2017) in English-language scholarship, among other designations. In this paper, I stick with the widely used migrant worker literature.

because there are substantial differences between worker authors and nonworker or “professional” authors as regards their respective access to cultural resources and the concomitant cultural capital.

Viewed more broadly, migrant worker literature can be seen as part of subaltern writing (*diceng xiezu* 底層寫作), a type of cultural production that led to intellectual debates at the turn of the twenty-first century. Subaltern writing primarily refers to works that focus on portraying the lives of marginalised individuals, depicting their living conditions and giving them a voice (Li Y. 2014). Both subaltern writing and migrant worker literature shed light on the struggles of labouring class individuals and adopt a critical stance towards societal realities, aiming to raise awareness about injustice and inequality. The term subaltern as used in this context encompasses a broad range of disadvantaged social groups, including urban laid-off workers, peasants, and rural-to-urban migrant workers. Migrant worker refers to the latter, specific demographic, which has emerged since China’s economic reforms – and thus, as noted above, migrant worker literature is a subset of subaltern writing. However, so-called subaltern writing is produced mostly by professional writers, while migrant worker literature has generally referred to works authored by worker writers in the southern economic zones. Thus, under the narrower definition, some scholars argue that subaltern writing is produced by intellectuals advocating for the marginalised, while migrant worker literature is produced by the marginalised who voice their own experience (Liu X. 2010; Zhou H. 2011).

Scholarship on migrant worker literature is on the increase. In China, Yang (2009) and Liu D. (2012) have published probably the most in-depth pieces on the subject to date, spanning genres and themes and engaging in important theoretical discussions on the issue of authorship and identity. Outside of the country, Sun (2012a, 2012b) regards migrant worker poetry as a significant means of cultural representation and political articulation, while Gong (2012, 2018) and Zhou X. (2017, 2020) are concerned about the environmental issues in migrant worker poetry. Jaguścik (2011) and Dooling (2017) focus on the representation of female migrant workers. Maghiel van Crevel (2017, 2021) has worked on various aspects of migrant-worker poetry (which he proposes to call “battler poetry”) and the complex force field that surrounds it, including its interlingual and cultural translation. Perhaps because of the mediagenicity of a subaltern type of *poethood* (van Crevel 2021: 168), the overwhelming majority of research in English-language scholarship to date is on poetry. Fictional and nonfictional prose remain sorely understudied, even though they can really enhance our understanding of migrant worker literature and culture in general. To fill this gap, I will concentrate on fictional and nonfictional prose in this paper.

Furthermore, the focus of migrant worker literature (as well as the scholarship on it, see above) is often on their urban experience (as distinct from the rural experience), such as that of factory work and life in the “villages in the city” (*chengzhongcun* 城中村, urban slums where migrant workers live). This focus on the urban setting is understandable, as it is where migrant workers become visible as a distinct demographic. While there are variations in urban narratives constructed by different stakeholders – including the authorities, activists, migrant workers themselves, middle-class media consumers, etc. – it is common for migrant workers to be depicted as a socially

disadvantaged group and a deviant presence within these narratives of urban life. By contrast, the reader less frequently encounters a complementary *rural* narrative on migrant workers’ experience of their native countryside; and when they do, this narrative is often simplified. This is remarkable, since the countryside holds demonstrable importance for migrant workers, and studying the associated rural narrative is essential for understanding the intricacies and diversity of the migrant worker experience as a whole.

In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Raymond Williams proposes the concept of “structure of feeling” to describe people’s general feelings in a particular era, with reference to shared values and social psychology. He further explains it in *Marxism and Literature* as “a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period” (Williams 1978: 131). In the spirit of Williams’ insight, I find that the emotional connection between migrant workers and their hometowns can be regarded as a distinct “structure of feeling” in contemporary China. Migrant workers come from the countryside, which holds special importance for their social relations and identity construction. I submit that the rural narrative is important in itself and that moreover, it provides a perspective that complicates the urban narrative.

In this paper, I explore how the rural narrative sheds light on our understanding of migrant workers to counterbalance and complicate the prevailing urban narrative. I will investigate the rural narrative from two perspectives, which I summarise as the view from the countryside and memories of the countryside, respectively. I will do so by focusing on two texts: Liang Hong’s 梁鴻 *China in One Village: The Story of One Town and the Changing World* (*Zhongguo zai Liangzhuang* 中國在梁莊, 2010) and Sun Huifen’s 孫惠芬 *Jikuan’s Carriage* (*Jikuan de mache* 吉寬的馬車, 2007).

Liang Hong was born in 1973 in a village in Henan Province and is now a professor of Chinese language and literature at Renmin University of China in Beijing. Until the age of 21, she lived near her hometown of Liangzhuang. Later, she moved to Beijing for her studies and work but continued to visit her hometown every year. The profound connections she fostered with her place of origin and its community kindled within her the aspiration to explore and write about her native place.² In 2008–2009, she devoted nearly five months to living in Liangzhuang, fully immersing herself in the intricacies of village life and engaging in conversations with the villagers. Based on these para-ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, Liang published a text entitled “Liangzhuang” (*Liangzhuang* 梁莊) in the prestigious literary journal *People’s Literature* (*Renmin wenxue* 人民文學) in its special nonfiction section in 2010. It became a hit at once and was expanded and republished the same year in book form with a new title: 中國在梁莊 *Zhongguo zai Liangzhuang*, later translated in English as *China in One Village: The Story of One Town and the Changing World* (hereafter *China in One Village*). Liang’s text has been well received in China and is considered a seminal work in Chinese nonfiction writing. I choose Liang’s text because it provides a large number of interviews with rural people and offers us a window

2. He Yingyu 何映宇. 2020. “梁鴻：梁莊是我生命中無法繞過的存在” (*Liang Hong: Liangzhuang shi wo shengming zhong wufa raoguo de cunzai*, Liang Hong: Liangzhuang is an indispensable presence in my life), *Xinmin Weekly* (新民周刊) 32: 74–8.

into how migrant workers are perceived in the countryside by their former fellow villagers. Moreover, Liang's status as an intellectual writer adds an intriguing layer of complexity. The migrant workers depicted in her book are people with whom Liang has a deep personal connection, including her own older brother, her best friend from adolescence, her cousin, neighbours, and others. Growing up in a rural area and maintaining a close bond with her hometown, Liang's proximity to migrant workers is much closer than commonly assumed, challenging the conventional perception of a significant distance between intellectuals and migrant workers.

Similarly, Sun Huifen, who was born in rural Liaoning Province in 1961, lived in the countryside until the age of 23. After leaving the countryside to work at the Dalian Federation of Literary and Art Circles, she maintained a persistent interest and deep connection to rural life (Jiang G. 2011). Drawing from her rich rural experiences and strong emotional connection to the countryside, Sun has published a series of rural novels since 2000, with a particular focus on the living conditions and inner struggles of migrant workers. Her novel *Jikuan's Carriage*, the second text I examine in this paper, was published in 2007. It is highly relevant to the issues addressed in this study. Firstly, it is rich in rural descriptions. Secondly, Sun's text presents a highly complex rural-urban relationship. This is in stark contrast to the rural-oriented migrant worker literature that has appeared to date, where nostalgia and rural memory are important tropes, and the countryside is often romanticised, aestheticised, and presented in oversimplified opposition to the city (Sun 2012b: 72; Picerni 2020: 156).

In a nutshell, both Liang's and Sun's texts are original, important contributions to a rural narrative in migrant worker literature that has remained understudied. Their perspectives and content complement each other, with one exploring how migrant workers are perceived in rural areas and the other delving into how migrant workers in urban settings draw on their memories of the countryside. Liang's nonfiction and Sun's fiction also complement each other in terms of genre. Notably, the same themes can be seen to traverse the genre boundary between them, shedding light on the significance of the rural narrative and enhancing our understanding of its diversity. Thus, while writing by professional writers has spurred debate on the authenticity of this subset within the wide-ranging notion of migrant worker literature, it can clearly offer new perspectives, with Liang's and Sun's works as cases in point.

The view from the countryside: Liang Hong's China in One Village

Most critics approach Liang Hong's *China in One Village* from the perspective of the genre of nonfiction writing, focusing on its relationship to social reality and to other genres in literature such as reportage (Liu Z. 2018; Chambers 2019). Others tend to read Liang's writing as native-soil literature³ (*xiangtu wenxue* 鄉土文學), since the title *China in One Village* implies that the village of Liangzhuang stands for China in general, which is in keeping with native-soil literature's feature of criticising the "national character" (*guominxing* 國民性) through rural narratives (Qin 2013; Zhang 2016). However, critics have largely overlooked the fact that the book specifically focuses on migrant workers, highlighting both the dilapidation of the village caused by the outflux of the migrant workers, and the

way migrant workers are perceived by those who remain in the countryside. Thus, my analysis of Liang's text concentrates mainly on its renditions of the countryside as a place that belongs to, and is of, the migrant workers in many ways, and on how her work shows migrant workers as positioned in a web of social relations that encompasses the countryside in addition to the city.

In *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (*Xiangtu Zhongguo* 鄉土中國), first published in 1947, sociologist Fei Xiaotong coined the term "the differential mode of association" (*chaxu geju* 差序格局) according to which Chinese social structure resembles a set of concentric circles with the "self" at the centre: "It is like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it. Everyone stands at the centre of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone's circles are interrelated" (1992: 63). In the spirit of Fei's concept of the differential mode of association, I divide the rural people who remain in the countryside into three groups, constituting three circles around the migrant worker: left-behind wives and husbands (the inner circle), left-behind parents and children (the second circle), and other villagers (the outer circle).⁴ My analysis begins at the outer circle and moves inward.

The outer circle: An overview of migrant workers

Economic motivation is always the primary topic of conversation regarding migrant workers among the villagers of the outer circle, and they believe that moving from rural area to the city for work (*dagong*) is necessary and inevitable because of the lack of material resources in the countryside. As the former village party secretary says: "Those who haven't gone to *dagong*, they're doing poorly. They only own two *mu*⁵ of land and can hardly feed themselves" (p. 191).⁶ Under such circumstances, *dagong* is a must, since traditional farming cannot support people, and it becomes a necessary source of extra income that is essential for rural people's survival. Indeed, we can see that the economic benefits of *dagong* have improved rural people's living standards. In the concluding remarks of the first chapter, Liang asserts:

It's always been the case in Liangzhuang Village that "people are plentiful while the land is scarce." (...) [B]efore the 1980s, nearly every family struggled on the poverty line. (...) After [the government implemented the policy of] reform and opening, *dagong* created new avenues for earning. (...) [B]y the 1990s, it was rare to see hungry or poorly dressed people in the village. (p. 27-8)

Thus, Liang shows that due to the disadvantage of "people [being] plentiful while the land is scarce," *dagong* is consensually considered

3. Native-soil literature is a genre of literature in Chinese culture that focuses on rural life, traditions, and values. Writers in this genre often draw inspiration from the countryside, depicting the daily lives, struggles, and customs of rural communities.
4. In the traditional society discussed by Fei Xiaotong, a vertical relationship (parent-child) in the family is closer than the relationship between husband and wife. However, in contemporary Chinese society, the traditional extended family has gradually been replaced by the nuclear family, and spouses are closer to each other than parents/children (Yan 2003). Thus, I will take Fei's pattern but place a spouse in the inner circle, closest to the self.
5. 畝 *mu* is a unit of area measurement used in China. One *mu* equals 666.67 square metres.
6. The translation of Liang's text is primarily based on Emily Goedde's translation, with my amendments when necessary.

a significant opportunity for rural people to increase income and improve their living standards.

Further, Liang's writing highlights the fact that *dagong* also provides members of the rural population with upward mobility opportunities. A small number of migrant-worker families get the opportunity to settle down in the cities and acquire formal residency rights. As for the majority of the village families that have young family members working in the cities while others stay in the village, their newly built houses are the central topic of conversation. As Liang enters the village, she notices: "There they stand, a row of brand-new houses, small, two-story buildings, and single-level homes. They are impressive, with large cement courtyards in front and tall gateways with roller doors" (p. 31). Thus, the social mobility brought by *dagong* is not confined to settling down in the city but is also embodied in migrant workers' newly built houses back home in the countryside. The houses show off their wealth and become a symbol of the migrant workers' self-esteem and success.

In Liang's representation, the villagers from the outer circle normally have positive evaluations of *dagong* and migrant workers, including female migrant workers who are otherwise sometimes stereotyped as prostitutes or castaways. Liang's text presents a different perspective, as it primarily portrays married women who migrate with their husbands for work, thus steering clear of such negative, morally normative portrayals of female migrant workers. From the point of view of people in the countryside, the migrant workers, usually young or middle-aged, stand out because they seize opportunities for social mobility despite the limitations imposed on them by their rural origins. Through working away from home, they achieve a measure of financial success that is visible and recognised in the countryside, especially embodied by their newly built houses. In other words, in the rural narratives, migrant workers can be achievers, contrary to the prevailing urban narratives where they are widely regarded as socially disadvantaged and backward. This has hardly been noted in research to date.

The second circle: The left-behind elderly and the left-behind children

The left-behind elderly and children are closely connected in Liang's book, since the elderly have to take care of the children when the generation in between leaves for *dagong*. The villagers of the outer circle provide us with a more straightforward economy-oriented perspective of the relationship between migrant workers and rural villagers; in this section, I will approach it from the point of view of the domestic division of labour and emotional attachments.

In his book *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (2003), Yan Yunxiang highlights the transformation of rural families due to individualism and the pursuit of economic benefits, specifically the tension between the original extended family and the recent model of the nuclear family. In Liang's text, the issue of left-behind elderly and children emerges as a prominent embodiment of these conflicts. Complaints from the left-behind elderly about the burden of raising left-behind children are widespread. This is in stark contrast with the popular discourse on the left-behind children, which often highlights their innocence and misery, the problems surrounding their schooling (e.g., in documentary films that criticise China's rural-urban disparity), and

the migrant workers' longing for their children (in migrant workers' various self-articulations in pursuit of social justice).⁷ However, what we see in Liang's text is that the left-behind elderly are dissatisfied with taking care of their grandchildren. They even condemn the selfishness of their migrant-worker sons and daughters, accusing them of increasing the elderly's burden for the benefit of their own nuclear families. This is a grandmother speaking:

I'm practically 60 and raising three little bastards. (...) So many who have left their kids at home but don't pay you a cent... Do I have an easy life? Am I not pitiful? I'd just brought my own up, and now I have to take care of theirs too – I won't have a day of peace until I die. (...) Who in the village would dare say they won't take care of their grandchildren? You're taking a serious risk, if you don't help. (...) Life is great for those who left to *dagong*. They go to work, come back and eat, and then go to bed – what leisure! We old folks at home are the ones to take care of their kids. (p. 260-2)

These complaints from the left-behind elderly are thought-provoking. They present a very different perspective from the one we see in famous migrant workers' self-representations, where their longing for their left-behind children takes centre stage. For example, in her autobiographical essay "I Am Fan Yusu" (*Wo shi Fan Yusu* 我是範雨素) and her poem "The Female Housekeeper" (*Jiazheng nügong* 家政女工), migrant worker author Fan Yusu 範雨素 describes a housekeeper who makes her own daughters left-behind children, because she spends all her time raising her employer's children. Fan's poem is provocative, and by demonstrating the forced breakdown of the connection between a mother and her young children, it condemns a social injustice. When we only sympathise with the housekeeping mother and her left-behind children, we run the risk of remaining blind to the flaws of the family arrangements that Liang's narrative indicates.

Also, the elderly clearly realise that it is they who enable the migrant workers to earn money to begin with: "If we don't take care of the children, how can they leave the village for *dagong*?! How much can they earn without us acting as nannies for free?" (p. 253). It is widely acknowledged that migrant workers are exploited in the city as they contribute significantly to China's economic growth but often receive limited benefits in return (Li Q. 2012). The elderly's accounts suggest that the exploitation of migrant workers extends beyond its primary object – the migrant workers – in the urban setting and affects their parents in the countryside in their turn. The lack of social support leads to these elderly people shouldering the burden of raising grandchildren, resulting in grievances and a perception of being "exploited" by their own offspring – even if this form of exploitation differs fundamentally from the systemic sociopolitical exploitation (and discrimination) encountered by migrant workers in the city themselves. This discussion is not about morality; rather, my

7. See for instance, Zhang Lijia, "One of 60 Million: Life as a 'Left-behind' Child in China," *South China Morning Post*, 21 January 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2128700/one-60-million-life-left-behind-child-china> (accessed on 25 September 2022); Ji Dan's 季丹 documentary film *When the Bough Breaks* (*Weichao* 危巢) about the education of migrant workers' children; and migrant worker poet Chen Nianxi's 陳年喜 poem "Son" (*Erzi* 兒子) about a migrant father's longing for his left-behind son.

point is to show rural people's views on migrant workers, which are hard to find in both sociological research and the mass media.

The inner circle: Left-behind wife Chunmei

In the book, Chunmei and her husband Gen'er aspire to build a new, spacious home but are currently crowded in with Gen'er's parents. Gen'er is a migrant worker, while Chunmei looks after their child and works in the fields at home. The story takes a tragic turn when Chunmei unexpectedly commits suicide, prompting Liang to investigate her story through interviews with her best friend in the village.

From the friend's account, Liang discovers that Chunmei's disappointment arises during the Spring Festival when Gen'er informs her that he won't be returning that year. Despite sending two letters to Gen'er, Chunmei receives no response. Later, Chunmei learns about a neighbouring migrant worker who infected his wife with a venereal disease. This incident intensifies Chunmei's suspicions that Gen'er may be engaging in similar behaviour and is afraid to come home, leading to a decline in her mental well-being. Afterwards, she has a big fight with her mother-in-law and drinks pesticide to end her life. Liang then adds her concluding remarks, pointing out that it is the sexual repression of a separated couple that has caused such a tragedy. In Liang's depiction of Chunmei's life, her migrant worker husband transcends the role of a mere provider; he becomes indispensable, and his absence leads to devastating consequences. Through this narrative, migrant workers are portrayed as beloved family members, who are sorely missed and needed. Such a portrayal contrasts with mainstream media often depicting migrant workers as marginalised individuals confined to urban settings and the labour market.⁸

Liang's text not only tells the tragic story of Chunmei but also highlights the unequal dynamics between left-behind wives and their migrant worker husbands. This inequality is exemplified through the normalisation of Gen'er's actions and the stigmatisation of Chunmei's desires. While Gen'er, like other migrant workers, chooses not to return home for the Spring Festival in order to earn double pay, Chunmei is deemed abnormal for desiring emotional connection with her husband. Her emotional outburst upon learning of Gen'er's absence for the Spring Festival leads to her being labelled a "nymphomaniac" by her mother-in-law and becomes the subject of village gossip. These portrayals overshadow the structural social issues caused by the absence of migrant workers and expose the cultural biases and systemic problems that contribute to the unequal treatment of left-behind wives in Chinese society. As Chunmei's story shows, migrant workers can also be one's significant other, and their absence might also cause damage and transform relationships within the inner circle.

Memories of the countryside: Sun Huifen's Jikuan's Carriage

The previous section has shown how villagers in the countryside perceive and judge migrant workers who leave the village for *dagong*. This section will discuss how migrant workers recall their native places, especially how they creatively use their memories of the countryside to reflect on and shape their lives in the city, in a case study of Sun Huifen's *Jikuan's Carriage*. Sun's text is rich

in both rural and urban descriptions. While critics have noted the difference between urban space and rural space in her fiction (Han 2008; Cheng 2010), the relationship between the countryside and the city in her work is not simply antagonistic: her migrant worker protagonists use rural elements to actually *transform* urban space and construct their identity in the process.

Preface: Jikuan and his rural home

The protagonist Jikuan, a young coachman in Xiema Village, is often ridiculed by the villagers for being a "lazy worm" (*lan chong* 懶蟲) because he chooses to stay in the village instead of becoming a migrant worker like other young men. However, Jikuan remains unaffected by this disrespect. In his view, laziness is a fulfilling way of life, allowing him to stay in one place without the need for constant travel in search of livelihood. Jikuan has found contentment in his way of life – he loves the countryside, enjoys the companionship of his old horse, and passes the time by reading French naturalist Jean-Henri Fabre's *The Records About Insects* (*Souvenirs entomologiques*).

Jikuan could have continued his harmonious coexistence with the countryside, but his romantic prospects are dim as most girls dream of marrying into the city. The girl Jikuan loves, Xu Meina, is married to a wealthy migrant worker, Little Boss (*xiao laoban* 小老闆, as he leads a team of migrant workers), and moves to the city. This event leaves Jikuan restless and dissatisfied with his once contented rural existence. Unlike stories where poverty drives people to cities, it is the unequal distribution of "sexual resources" (Cheng 2010: 109) and the success of Little Boss that humiliates Jikuan, prompting him to leave the countryside and become a migrant worker in Huaicheng City.

For the migrant worker Jikuan, the countryside remains very important. Physically living in the city, Jikuan never ceases recalling and missing the countryside, yet his memories of the countryside are constantly changing as his stay in the city continues, from resistance to the city to interaction with it, and finally to the point where the distinction of city and countryside is blurred and disappears, in something that comes close to an equation of the two. This change is filled with symbolic meaning, and I will analyse this important part of the text in the following section.

Rural memory as resistance to the city

In the early days of Jikuan's urban life, the countryside and the city are in binary opposition. From the perspective of a "lazy worm," he sees the city and the countryside as two trees, one eating people and the other feeding people:

I can't stand moving bricks [at the construction site] in the sun for more than ten hours a day... Instead of seeing any delicious leaves on the tree [of the city], I feel like I am a leaf eaten by the city. In less than a week, I've become so thin that my waist can't even hold up my belt (...). The old tree of Xiema Village does not have leaves all year round, but at least, in my opinion, its endless idleness can make me full.⁹ (p. 3)

8. Liu Junying 劉俊穎, and Xu Rongsheng 徐榮生, "加強農民工技能培訓, 促進農村勞動力轉移" (*Jiaqiang nongmingong jineing peixun, cujin nongcun laodongli zhuan yi*, Strengthen the skills training of migrant workers and promote the transfer of the rural labour force), *Chaoyang ribao* (朝陽日報), 9 July 2013.

9. The following translations of Sun's text are mine.

Urban life for Jikuan is marked by long physical labour in the scorching sun, which brings physical fatigue, weight loss, and mental problems. On the contrary, life in the countryside to Jikuan is much more comfortable. Although it is not as rich as the city in material terms, it provides sufficient nutrition for one's spiritual wealth. The opposition between the city and the countryside becomes more pronounced when Jikuan begins to feel homesick:

I'm homesick. (...) In my hometown, everywhere is empty, but my heart is full. (...) Now, in the daytime, the deafening noise of cement mixers and lifts fills the air on the construction site, while at night, a cramped shed houses a dozen people, permeated with the pungent odour of sweaty feet and socks. This ubiquitous fullness makes me sick, but I feel like there is an indescribable void... as if I am sand floating in the wind (...) I miss my hometown; I lived so well in the countryside, like a fish in water, but I wasn't careful and was thrown on the shore... (p. 66-7)

The rural-urban dichotomy is vividly depicted through Jikuan's contrasting experiences of rural and urban spaces. The vastness of the rural landscape brings him a sense of contentment, while the urban environment, with its noise, crowds, and odours, leaves him feeling empty and disconnected. This further symbolises the countryside and the city as opposing concepts, likened to water and shore. In his hometown, Jikuan feels like a fish in water, while in the city, he feels like a fish out of water, stranded on the shore.

In the first stage of Jikuan's urban experience, his memories of the countryside are consistently marked by a comparison to the city, establishing an antagonistic relationship between the two. The countryside contains a series of positive factors, while the city contains negative ones, similar to Williams' observation in *The Country and the City* that the positive countryside is set against the "contemporary change" of social relations in the city (2016: 49). In the contrast between the city and the countryside, migrant workers such as Jikuan tend to identify with the countryside in terms of belonging and emotional response. This connection to the countryside and his critical perspective on the city hold valuable significance in alleviating the hardships he experiences in the urban environment.

Interaction: The re-creation of rural memory

In the second stage of his urban experience, Jikuan finds a job at a small interior decoration company and slowly establishes some connections within the city. Also at this stage, Jikuan gradually relinquishes his previous opinion of the rural-urban opposition, and begins to realise that the village can survive in the city in a certain way and become a home to migrant workers who are "floating" in the city:

In this world, there are some villagers who, despite being scattered far and wide, still belong to a collective. (...) They have been wandering for a long time in this city, just like iron filings scattered on the beach, and they need the magnet of warmth. The Xiema Village restaurant becomes a magnet to attract them when it releases such warmth. (p. 84)

The Xiema Village restaurant exemplifies that the relationship between the city and the countryside can extend beyond mere opposition. Its name is derived from Jikuan's hometown, Xiema Village. Owned by Black Peony (a nickname symbolising her beauty), who migrated from Xiema Village to Huaicheng City a few years earlier, the restaurant mainly caters to migrant workers from the same village. Consequently, the restaurant becomes an urban rendition of their hometown, establishing a sense of belonging and connection among the floating migrant workers. This establishment shows the possibility of the close coexistence of the countryside and the city, providing conditions for Jikuan to use rural elements to change urban space.

Later, Black Peony consults Jikuan when the restaurant is renovated for reopening. Jikuan decorates the restaurant in a rural style:

[We] get a bunch of rice ears, peppers, and corn from the countryside, and hang them on the wall properly. (...) I am so excited as if I really returned to the fields. (...) An old horse is pulling a carriage, galloping between the rice fields and the corn. At that moment, I feel that my idea is romantic and poetic because I can resurrect my memory and turn it into a palpable reality. (p. 241)

The Xiema Village restaurant was first decorated in an urban-trendy style, but it has now been transformed with the incorporation of typical Chinese rural objects. By doing so, Jikuan no longer passively uses his rural memory to fight symbolically against the city; instead, he actively uses rural elements to turn his memory into a physical reality, and as a result, practically changes his experience of the urban space.

At this point, it is valuable to examine the text through the lens of Lefebvre's spatial theories. According to Lefebvre (1991), space is not only a social construct that encompasses the reproduction of social relations but also a mechanism of control, domination, and power. Thus, the production of space also means a change in social and power relations. In this light, Jikuan's decoration of the urban space with rural elements manifests his agency. By imprinting the countryside onto the city, he creates a space that aligns with his own cultural disposition, akin to Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, within the city. Bourdieu's concept indeed encompasses internalised lifestyles, tastes, attitudes, and mannerisms that prevent those from lower social classes from escaping their previous social relations and positions. The underlying premise of Bourdieu's concept is that different groups possess distinct and defined habitus. However, Jikuan's incorporation of rural elements into the urban space actually challenges the strict demarcation and destabilises the original associations between habitus, social relations, and space. In essence, the infusion of rural habitus into the urban space expands its boundaries and fosters a more inclusive environment, at least within the literary realm of Huaicheng City.

The relationship between the countryside and the city has transitioned from opposition to active integration. The successful renovation of the restaurant in the text exemplifies the significance of rural memory and its practical impact on urban spaces. Obviously, the transformation of a small portion of urban space will not directly, palpably empower migrants to manipulate the labour market or

address their inequality; but its symbolic significance remains noteworthy. Establishing a dedicated space for migrant workers within the typically indifferent urban environment generates positive effects for their lives. Migrant workers find solace in the restaurant's comfortable and relaxing environment, alleviating their nostalgia. Additionally, the restaurant's renovation attracts lots of attention, increasing Jikuan's fame, economic prosperity, and entrepreneurial opportunities. This perspective highlights the transformative power of rural memory, not only to critique the city but also as a practical resource for reshaping urban spaces, ultimately benefitting migrant workers. This materialises through a gesture – however modest – that ultimately benefits migrant workers because it hints at the possibility of restoring their agency and dignity in an alien and sometimes hostile environment.

Equation: The city is a village

With the successful renovation, Jikuan launches his own interior decoration company and starts a relationship with Xu Meina, who has divorced Little Boss. To achieve financial success, Jikuan aims to establish connections that will enable him to bid for a major renovation project at the Municipal Bureau of Culture. However, as he builds his network, Jikuan's memory of the countryside changes, revealing negative similarities between the city and the village:

Jing Lifu (...) bluntly says: "There is no friendship between you and me. Just say, how much are you willing to pay? The more you pay the more we can do." It sounds even more sinister than Liu Datou, the village head who took money from my second sister-in-law and sent her son to the army. I never heard of him asking for money so directly. (p. 290)

For the first time, Jikuan's perception of the countryside includes not only its natural scenery but also the villagers themselves. Previously, he preferred to indulge in the beauty of nature and overlook the corruption within the village. However, as he establishes connections in the city to advance his career, he finds himself participating in the same behaviour he had tried to avoid in the village. This confronts him with the dark side of the countryside. He gradually realises that the way in which villagers and urbanites do things is very similar and further asserts:

The city (...) is a village, similar to Xiema Village. I should be happy that the city is a village (...). But it's not the case at all. (p. 290)

The city is a village now, but unlike the previous positive interaction, the connection between the two now lies in their shared characteristics of being dirty and corrupted. This similarity tarnishes Jikuan's once-beautiful memory of the countryside, revealing the erosion of his ideal lifestyle and personal identity.

Sun's text concludes with a tragic realisation. Jikuan's financial success comes at a great cost: not only does he become the type of person he despises, but his relationship with Xu Meina also deteriorates due to his preoccupation with business. The same is true for his fellow former villagers, who have been selling their physical strength in the city or achieved minor success in business only to fall to the bottom again. Jikuan comes to understand that the aspirations

of migrant workers for a better future in the city are reminiscent of Sisyphean struggles, as they often find themselves going back to square one in the end. This realisation parallels Jikuan's discovery that there is ultimately no fundamental difference between the city and the countryside.

However, going back to square one does not imply a complete lack of progress. Despite the characters facing unfulfilled desires, their experiences and struggles in the city leave lasting imprints, just as they set up and ruralised the Xiema Village restaurant in Huaicheng City. The mere presence of migrant workers in the city signifies their transformative impact, pushing the boundaries of urban space and fostering inclusivity. Sun's novel shows a refreshing perspective on the relationship between the countryside and migrant workers, where the latter are not reduced to passivity in the face of an unchanging, all-powerful urban regime. In her representation, the countryside is not a disadvantage for migrant workers, nor is it a comfort zone to retreat to, but rather an important symbolic and practical resource to draw on for migrant workers in their struggle for survival in the city.

Both Liang's and Sun's texts focus on the relationship between migrant workers and the rural, and they exhibit intriguing similarities and differences. In Sun's text, the mockery Jikuan faces as a "lazy man" before *dagong* echoes the positive evaluation of migrant workers by the villagers of the outer circle depicted in Liang's text. Additionally, Jikuan's departure from the village evokes regret from the locals who rely on his assistance, mirroring the increased burdens faced in Liang's text by villagers left behind after the migrant workers have gone to the city. However, the texts also present contrasting elements. In Liang's text, the houses built by migrant workers in their hometown – their symbols of success – are urban and modern in style, while Sun's text showcases Jikuan's achievement in the city through the rural-style decoration of the restaurant. These diverging portrayals raise questions about what it means to succeed as a migrant worker, not to mention one's relation to modern/urban or traditional/rural aesthetics.

Yet, it is the juxtaposition in both texts of urban and rural elements that highlights the distinct in-between identities of migrant workers and the entanglement of urban and rural characteristics within China's modernisation process. Ultimately, Liang's and Sun's texts truly open up the rural narrative, in a dialogue of mutual corroboration and challenge that helps for understanding the intricacies and diversity of the migrant worker experience as a whole.

Concluding remarks

By conjoining close reading with theoretical analysis, this paper has investigated the crucial yet overlooked rural narrative in Chinese migrant worker literature, to explore the essential question of rural-urban migrant workers' practical and emotional relationship with their native countryside. Through a close examination of Liang's and Sun's texts and periodic comparisons with the urban narrative as told in migrant worker literature, sociological research, and media representations, I have demonstrated the significance of taking the rural narrative into account both for the understanding of internal labour migration in all its complexity and multi-directionality, but also to analyse the sociopolitical dynamics of migration through its literary representation.

By focusing on literary representations of migrant workers and more specifically on what I have called the rural narrative, my study therefore offers an alternative to widespread and sometimes clichéd visions of rural-to-urban migrant workers in present-day China. As Liang's text shows, rural people mostly have positive evaluations of *dagong* and migrant workers: migrant workers can be achievers; they seize opportunities for social mobility and are family members who are needed and missed. Similarly, Sun's writing demonstrates that migrant workers have the actual ability to modify urban space, rather than being powerless subalterns stuck in urban environments that are supposedly not theirs to belong to. Taken together, these texts highlight features of migrant workers that have mostly been invisible to date, certainly also when it comes to the portrayal of this demographic in media discourse outside China.

At the same time, it is through the eyes of migrant workers that we are able to glimpse a countryside distinct from the cliché. Rural identity is frequently seen as the root of migrant workers' humiliation and original sin, as well as the basis of their "backwardness." However, Liang's text shows that, to migrant workers, respect and recognition in the countryside allows them to relieve their suffering in the city. In Sun's novel, Jikuan's experience further shows that migrant workers' rural background is not inevitably a disadvantage. On the contrary, Jikuan not only relies on the memories of the countryside to criticise the city, but also uses his rural habitus to win himself a job opportunity and achieve economic gains. He builds a relationship with the city that transcends mere antagonism, and whose ambivalence highlights the complexity of the migrant worker experience. Literary representations of migrant workers suggest that while migrant workers are physically absent from the countryside, they are still closely connected with it.

In all, this analysis contributes to a balanced, thoroughgoing understanding of the cultural productions related to one of the most extensive internal migration in the world, a topic that will likely continue to attract scholarly interest in the years and decades to come.

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