

# Mobilizing Workers Poetry

## A Pedagogical Journal

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In 2014, 24-year-old Chinese migrant worker and poet Xu Lizhi kills himself by jumping out the window of a Foxconn factory in Shenzhen.<sup>1</sup> As a line worker in a factory run by the world's biggest multinational contracted to build consumer electronics, Xu Lizhi manufactured gadgets for Big Tech companies like Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon.<sup>2</sup>

In 2018, I move to Changshu—a Chinese city and textile industry hub in Jiangsu province—to teach theatre at a private high school. Near our opulent campus, in what students call “the village,” people working in shabby studios sew clothes, piling mounds of garments along the narrow streets. In the summer of 2021, a second vacation during which I can't travel to see my family in Romania because of Covid-19 restrictions and closed borders, two construction workers, father and son, employees of a company outsourced for campus repairs over the break, are found dead on site. I don't really know what happened; we are not allowed to talk about it.

Because of another wave of infections, January 2022 finds me teaching online again. On Microsoft Teams with my two grade-10 classes we discuss migrant workers' poetry, including Xu Lizhi's. The irony that we have no other choice but to use Microsoft does not escape us. We try to understand. We read about migrant workers. We read Marx. Students translate to each other Marxist terms from English to Mandarin. We read David Graeber on “bullshit jobs,” which makes some students knowingly bob their heads—kids prepped to vie for the managerial positions with alembicated titles that Graeber rants against. We debate Ursula Le Guin's haunting short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1991), where the well-being of an affluent society requires one imprisoned boy to be continuously abused.

By March, most students return to campus. In order to be allowed to conduct face-to-face teaching, the school enters a closed system where no one can leave campus once they enter it. School staff—cooks, cleaners, gardeners—cannot go home to their families at the end of the working day; they are housed on the crowded premises. Most teaching and administrative staff already live on campus grounds in comfortable apartments. While teaching and admin staff are employed directly by the school, maintenance staff work for other companies. The school is not responsible for their wages, benefits, or well-being. In theatre class, we experiment with reembodying the corporeal

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1. This work was supported by project POCU/993/6/13/153310 cofinanced by the European Social Fund, Operational Programme Human Capital 2014–2020.

2. People's full names in Chinese typically begin with the surname. I follow this convention except when a person reversed the order themselves in the English transliteration of their name. In the English sources and translations I consulted, proper nouns do not appear with pinyin diacritics, but I do use them for some common nouns designating central concepts.

language of labor poetry using physical techniques drawn from theatre companies Frantic Assembly and RashDash, and from choreographer Jackie Snow. In May, the students perform devised pieces based on migrant workers' poetry. Throughout this process I learn about labor, teaching, and the theatre.

## Our Lives Are Cheap

Like other poets eking out a subsistence in dead-end jobs, Xu Lizhi wrote poignant verses about the long work hours with meager pay; the lack of job security in seasonal contracts; the city slums where companies house migrant workers in horrid living conditions; the literally toxic work environments; the frequent job-related injuries that lead to being fired; the lack of any form of social security from a state that demonizes migrant workers as the dirty, grumbling, and uneducated; the disposable communities; the sacrificed natural environments; the wasted individuals in a productivist world:

I swallowed an iron moon  
they called it a screw

I swallowed industrial wastewater and unemployment forms  
bent over machines, our youth died young

I swallowed labor [...] (Xu Lizhi, "I Swallowed an Iron Moon," in Qin [2016:198])<sup>3</sup>

Xu Lizhi's suicide is hardly the first or the last within obscenely rich companies raking in profits through global recessions and world pandemics as the employees bear the brunt of death and deprivation. Seasonal workers have exhausted themselves and died to build infrastructures and keep the global production and supply chains running since the 19th century, as when Chinese migrants built America's railroad. In her 2012 book *Scattered Sand*, Hsiao-Hung Pai writes about the estimated—at the time of her writing—200 million Chinese migrants from the countryside—the *míngōng*—working temporary jobs in China and abroad in construction, small trade, services, and manufacturing; and about their systemic marginalization despite their foundational work in local and global economies. Zheng Xiaoqiong writes how

the representatives give speeches, the Central Consultative Conference puts forward proposals, while elementary students explain in their homework to create a clean and tourist-friendly city, migrant workers must be forbidden from crowding in (Zheng Xiaoqiong, "In the Hardware Factory," 133)

Pai lays out how the Chinese government turned its rural population into one deemed "superfluous," served up on the chopping block of deregulated, privatized industry following Deng Xiaoping's "to-get-rich-is-glorious ethos" (Pai 2012). Back in the 1950s, China's central government enforced the *hùkǒu*, a household status bureaucratic system tying a person to their place of birth, meant to ban movement into the city from the rural areas decimated by the Great Leap Forward. A person with a rural *hùkǒu* couldn't transfer it to a city and was not entitled to the national pension system. Since the 1980s, when China opened up to the global market economy that it inundated with its cheap products, the cheap labor that fueled this economic miracle was sourced from the languishing, impoverished countryside. Even though now theoretically migrant workers can get permits to work in cities, moving the *hùkǒu*—which implies buying a house in the city—remains a pipe dream for most. The poet Xin You defines in his verses the identities of migrant workers as "We who have no permanent residence / we who make our home wherever we are" (161) and as "we who live in the city / but are still called farmers" (161). The complicated residence regulation that still ties migrant workers to places of birth guarantees that companies and city authorities have no obligations towards

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3. All poems are from *Iron Moon* edited by Qin Xiaoyu and translated by Eleanor Goodman (Qin 2016). Going forward, only page numbers will be noted.

them in terms of proper wages, work safety, long-term contracts, decent living conditions, access to education, health care, and other social systems of support. Authorities offer little protection against ubiquitous company practices like imposed overtime with no extra pay, sudden layoffs or cutting of hours, withholding wages, denying any vacation time, and regulating and surveilling the lives of people in company dormitories. This makes possible lean, flexible, just-in-time production while ensuring low production costs. When one migrant worker falls exhausted, ill, or dead, another three are ready to take their place. “Our lives are cheap,” says a migrant laborer (in Pai 2012). Deaths are cheap too. Stretching the span of precarity beyond living standards, Rebecca Schneider talks about “persons with precarious deaths,” like Xu Lizhi, who do not “appear to *count* if dead” (2012:151). In a stagnating world economy, huge profits are made on the backs of vast, disposable populations with legally barred access to standard, salaried employment in countries with an ever-increasing wealth disparity. Cédric Durand traces the mind-boggling soaring corporate profits at the moment when we’ve reached an “exhaustion of the productive dynamic” to Big Tech intellectual monopolies, financial speculation, and “globalized production chains, exploiting cheaper labour” (2022a:41).

Chinese migrant worker poetry written by people who work in mines to rip out the energy sources and materials needed to fuel our activities, who build our household objects, who sew our clothes, who make the electronics and the infrastructure support that are the crucial material base for all dot-com miracles belie any illusions that we live in a postindustrial global society. Techy jargon and shortened perspectives that do not take into account global production and supply chains sustain such illusions. On the ground, and not “in the cloud,” reality for these laborers isn’t much different than it was for 19th-century factory workers. Their reality gets more easily ignored when the majority of the global workforce is not employed directly in manufacture.

Aaron Benanav explains worldwide deindustrialization as the falling percentage of people employed in manufacture in the context of an increasing pool of jobseekers, the majority of whom end up working underpaid jobs in the expanding service sector (2020). Yet, we are still producing in quantities typical of an industrial period; the number of people in manufacture remains large, despite decades of increasing labor productivity through measures like “sweating” more output from fewer workers, imposing overtime, increasing (self) surveillance, suppressing wages, outsourcing, or offshoring to areas of cheaper labor like China. But the growth rate is sluggish in a crowded, highly competitive global market at overcapacity, leading to stagnant capitalist economies. Jason Smith points out that the IT industry hasn’t succeeded in replacing manufacture as the growth engine of our economic system because digital technologies do not produce value, functioning mostly as intermediaries between customers and service providers or as “extremely refined

advertising delivery systems” (2020:43). Heavy industry, production, manufacture, and global supply chains moving goods around the world still move our economy. Significant aspects of this labor could be automated, but they are not, since production costs are often lower by employing an underpaid person to do the job. For all the growth of robot manufacturing in some sectors, the global economy still relies for its existence on laboring bodies and large-scale extractive industries.

**The spiritualized seductive language of digital industries induces a collective amnesia of the vast human and natural resources spent daily on the production, maintenance, and expansion of “mental” sectors like IT, finance, and the culture and entertainment industries.**

To remain competitive on the glutted global market, firms push to produce more

with fewer employees and reduced costs, successfully lobbying governments to forego labor protections. With fewer jobs available in manufacture, and growing inequality that restricts access to diminishing decent, salaried, stable jobs, we find ourselves with a burgeoning “servant economy” characterized by the proliferation of low-wage, manual intensive service jobs like food delivery, elderly and child care, cleaning, and farm labor (Smith 2020). As the competition for the fewer available jobs in relation to the number of job seekers intensifies, people are willing to work more for

less and in poorer conditions. Benanav refers to this as a global crisis not in unemployment, but in underemployment. He points out that the majority of jobs today in the world are nonstandard, meaning temporary, contracted, seasonal gigs. These jobs in fact are the new standard. As early as the 1990s, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello noticed the “increased casualization” of work and the rise of “atypical jobs” ([2005] 2007:168, xxxix). Smith (2018) criticizes David Graeber for focusing on the increase of decently paid bullshit managerial positions when the bigger proliferation has actually occurred in the downright shit jobs.

Our extractive production models haven’t significantly changed since the first Industrial Revolution. In tracing the history of Western labor discourses, Anson Rabinbach highlights the old-as-capitalism idea that “technology was making corporal work obsolete” (1992:297). The spiritualized seductive language of digital industries induces a collective amnesia of the vast human and natural resources spent daily on the production, maintenance, and expansion of “mental” sectors like IT, finance, and the culture and entertainment industries. Durand reminds us of Big Tech’s fight for control over the “relevant physical infrastructure [as] a pre-condition for hegemony over knowledge,” the vast infrastructure consisting of data farms, processors, hard drives, and bandwidth cables wrapping around a million kilometers of earth’s surface (2022b:37). The 2000s saw another trend in promotional discourses for immaterial, creative industries and information societies. Richard Florida talks about trade in immaterial forms, arguing how “the ultimate intellectual property—the one that really replaces land, labor, and capital as the most valuable economic resource—is the human creative faculty” ([2002] 2012:25). Yet by now many of the “creatives” have realized that not being able to own a house, not having set limits on their labor hours and practices, and not having savings leads to pauperization, burnout, and a decline in their ultimate human creative faculty. The “creative city” takes shape as a gentrified urban glitz with a blooming housing crisis, sparkling with shopping malls and newly built office buildings, squeezing out open public spaces, marginalizing even further the poor, the old, the “unproductive.” Zheng Xiaoqiong illustrates the change in Chinese cities when mentioning in her poem “the central zone, where they forge a subpar financial center” while “the last home-owning holdouts having their houses torn down, / relocated” (133).

The same qualities that make the creative class competitive on the labor market—their flexibility, mobility, independence, and adaptability, traits that migrant workers always possessed—also render them prone to exploitation. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello posit that the aesthetic critique of regimented, Taylorist work of the 1960s was absorbed to produce a new model of the ideal worker that, like an artist, is capable of creativity, self-management, and is gifted with an (illusory) autonomy. Yet míngōng poets may actually show us that what’s currently happening is not that the model worker becomes the creative one (since that’s always been the case for the most exploited) but that after a welfare state interlude, surviving on the labor market reverts to exhausting our physical and mental capacities. Work shifts not towards breezy, tech-supported “dematerialized work, work without the body,” but towards a growing re-cognition of the materiality of all labor due to precarity (Rabinbach 1992:298). The exhausted bodies of the “creatives” enact through fatigue their working-class 19th-century resistance to the untenable dualism of mind and body in “knowledge” industries and discourses. Fatigue, that “endemic disorder of industrial society” crawls up again, now on the tiered ranks of privilege (2).

While profits accumulate and production continues beyond social, biological, and ecological reason, as inequalities sharpen, as market logic absorbs more of the social sphere, as more people slide into precarity, into the “industrial reserve army” (Marx [1867] 1982:796), we can speak not of “deindustrialization” but of the viral industrialization of our world. In a chase for market viability, sectors of the service economy become profitable (but never as profitable as manufacture) once they “industrialize,” meaning once they increase output while “efficientizing” costs, which translates to having fewer people work more, often in contract jobs. The growing míngōng-ization may be a potentially viable way towards solidarizing different types of workers. It may also help us realize how the pretense that we live in an intelligent, post-Fordist global economy is an insult to workers who kill themselves rather than work another day in the Fordist assembly line.

## A Language of Screws

Xu Lizhi announces his protest suicide on his blog a day before he follows through with his pledge. Upon his death, his poems spread through the internet, including in an English translation “by friends of the Nao project,” posted on *Libcom.org* (Nao Project 2014). In an introduction, they mention the 14 known suicides at Foxconn in 2010—out of more attempted, and more unreported, possibly in the hundreds—that resulted in buildings with safety nets that reduced, but did not put an end to, the suicides. The high rates of successful and unsuccessful suicides at Foxconn made big news in the early 2010s, as the Shenzhen factory was revving production to keep up with the huge demand for the new Apple products—iPad, iPhone, iPod. In 2012, Mike Daisey’s show *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, with its fabricated interviews from Foxconn workers, had the unintended effect of shifting the public discussion from labor and production to a more inconsequential one about truth and fiction. Shannon Steen’s analysis of the “scandal” borrows from Baudrillard’s notion of “simulation of scandal to regenerative ends” (1988:174) to show how the discussion avoided facing the harder realization that journalism and performance both “form [...] a core repertoire” that activates neoliberalism (2014:18). A few months after Steen published her essay, Xu Lizhi posted his last blog entry. In a poem about work suicides wryly nodding to the paper bureaucracy curtailing lived realities through its title “Going Home on Paper,” Guo Jinniu writes about “the thirteenth jump in six months” (38). The same poem lays open the sociopathy of the safety nets: “My job is installing a suicide guardrail on the thirteenth floor, / for a day’s pay” (39).

In 2015, some migrant worker poets—miners, seamstresses, construction workers, as well as chemical plant and other factory workers—star in a prize-winning Chinese documentary directed by Wu Feiyue called *The Verse of Us*.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, poet and critic Qin Xiaoyu edits and publishes in China a substantial selection of migrant workers’ poetry. In 2016, White Pine Press publishes Qin Xiaoyu’s *Iron Moon* anthology in Eleanor Goodman’s translation. This is what we use in our theatre class performance. Although varying in style, all poems talk about work.

**The *Iron Moon* poems attest to all the notches in the fabric of time and space carved by working hands that refuse to be reduced to disposable parts.**

China has a long tradition of “labor literature” written by workers, which comprises long and short prose forms from short stories to novels, as well as poetry. Qin Xiaoyu explains in his introduction to the anthology how the latter, labor poetry, has origins in the 1990s wave of migrations, and that the word “labor” is tainted by the realities of precarious,

transient employment so much so that “it implies working for a boss and being paid piecemeal” (2016:19). In *Iron Moon*, there’s no Stakhanovite odes to muscle, sweat, and effort. Equally missing are Weberian superimpositions of morality and dignity over notions of honest hard work, standing against the tide of the globally dominant narrative of incessant productivity, of what Graeber calls a civilization obsessed with “work as an end and meaning in itself,” even when the work can be pointless, useless, or inflicting harm (2018:xxiv). *Iron Moon* articulates how all industrial production is senseless production. As in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ([1932] 1992), wage labor under capitalism appears in these poems as a relentless process of objectification and sheer physical, psychological, and ontological exhaustion that wants nothing less than to erase the living. It drains a planet, and extracts so much labor that it depletes the sense of a biological organism:

[...]                      their exhausted numb  
faces are like ghosts    they’re stuffed into machine stations  
work uniforms        assembly lines    [...]

4. Singer/songwriter Chelsea Wolfe was also inspired by Xu Lizhi’s life and poetry and released her song “Iron Moon” in 2015 (Geist 2015).

[...] they're constantly put together arranged  
 into an electronics factory ants nest a toy factory honeycomb  
 [...] they've been simplified down to fingers and legs  
 (Zheng Xiaoqiong, "Kneeling Workers Demanding Their Pay," 126)

The *Iron Moon* poems attest to all the notches in the fabric of time and space carved by working hands that refuse to be reduced to disposable parts. With the booming voice of 200 million people, the Chinese migrant worker poets write arresting verses from beneath the annihilating weight of supplying cheap products to the world, and in doing so reveal that the process of objectification is never all-encompassing. What does it take to write a poem after a 16-hour work shift? For how long can a person manage to "toil[...] all day just to live and open [their] eyes at night to write poems" (Xu Lizhi, "I Speak of Blood," 194)? In his poem "Here I Gather Up Poetry's Bones," Zeng Jiqiang refuses the juicy, colorful "flesh" of poetry that "pedantic poets" gorge themselves with and says he "only want[s] the bones" (192). With a hint of defensiveness against gatekeepers of the literary world, editor Qin Xiaoyu writes that the bony, pared-down Chinese migrant worker poems "tend not to be concerned with grand, abstract issues and their language is typically not highly refined" (20). Those grand, abstract issues that are enforced on others under the guise of the "universal" do not speak to the realities of migrant workers. And their language, echoing violence, cannot be refined:

I speak this sharp-edged, oiled language  
 of cast iron—the language of silent workers  
 [...] language of severed fingers life's foundational language in the dark  
 place of unemployment  
 between the damp steel bars these sad languages  
 .....I speak them softly  
 in the roar of the machines. A dark language. Language of sweat. Rusty  
 language  
 [...] Rust-speckled switches, stations, laws, the system. I speak a black-blooded fired language  
 of status, age, disease, finances...a fearful, howling language. Tax collectors and petty officials.  
 Factory bosses. Temporary residence permits. Migrant workers...their languages  
 language of a girl jumping off a building. The GDP's language. [...] the language of holding life's railings in the gusts of fruitless labor [...]  
 (Zheng Xiaoqiong, "Language," 122)

## Fruitless Labor

When I read *Iron Moon* with my 10th-grade students, we circled around questions of this poetry's relevance to us. Plenty of my students came from China's elite, streaming in on Teams from spacious marbled mansions. Some of us, like myself, came from working-class and peasant parents and grandparents. But all of us now live at least an existence of sufficient comfort, benefitting from the socialist programs in public education access pursued by our respective states. In my case, however, I feel middle class while living in Romania, but I did not feel so while living in America where I studied for my college and university degrees. With my students in China, the more we traded experiences, talked about class, and tried to define its various stratifications, the more we got confused and left it at a recognition of the concept's historical, geographical, economic, and ethnic relativity. We resisted the common imaginary of the working class reduced to the picture of a burly factory worker operating a machine, and blanketed the term over the campus workers, the cleaning ladies and maintenance men, the taxi drivers and delivery people, the many other working people that build, clean, and maintain infrastructures, that serve as supermarket cashiers, restaurant dishwashers, cooks, nurses, or schoolteachers.

While we remained unsure about the exact delineations around a shifty concept like “the working class”—does it just mean being poor and living paycheck to paycheck? Or are you born into it? What’s the difference between people working in manual jobs who are descendants of enslaved people and those working in manual jobs who descended from peasants?—we inched toward an understanding of the forces of proletarianization operating in our lives. Marx’s ideas of the deleterious individual and social effects of competition across all spheres of activity resonated strongly with the students. In their continuous hustle to find jobs, in their movement from one gig to another, in their systemic *un*employment, migrant workers constitute what in classical Marxism is referred to as the “lumpenproletariat” or the reserve army of labor. Pai puts migrant workers in a class of the “mobile proletariat,” reminiscent of how Michael Denning identifies as “proletariat” not the urban condition of being a wage worker, but the dispossession and devaluation that leads to the destitution of wagelessness, to the “radical dependence on the market” ([2010] 2016:275). This dependency, and the accompanying growing insecurity and anxiety, is something that young people today feel sharply. All the short bios of the migrant worker poets in *Iron Moon* reveal work histories jumping between cities, trades, and specializations. The poems too refer to a systemic job transience, as when Ni Wen writes that “in ’92 I started working at a brickyard in Hebei / in ’93 I demolished old houses in Shanghai, in ’98 I worked on an assembly / line in Chongqing” (“Filling Out Job Applications,” 90). Pedagogical models trumpet goals of preparing children for the “real world,” an implied synonym for the job market, which often translates to warning the youth of the precarity of employment, asking them to be flexible in changing jobs and specializations, to be ready to adapt to market demands, to mold themselves according to changing job descriptions (never the other way around). Tian Xiaoyin indicates his “status [...] of a man held in suspense / doing an odd job here and there,” a state of permanent insecurity and readiness that’s portrayed today as desirable for most employees (“I Use Screws to Fix China’s Failings,” 189). Most of us will be expected to migrate in search of job opportunities. I certainly did, all the way from Romania to the US to China. In the case of my theatre students, some of them dreaming of becoming professional artists, the prospect of having to survive pay-day to payday scares them, and rightfully so. As freelancers in a gig economy, cultural workers trade the security of salaried employment for the precarity of wage labor in order to be allowed to do the work they want to do. Their employee status resembles what Tian Xiaoyin describes in his poem “File” as “Hourly workers. Temporary worker. Contract worker. / Overtime, on duty” (191).

**Wasting youth and losing fingers to make trinkets destined for the trash heap are realities experienced only by migrant workers in manufacture.**

But white-collar workers get paid more than migrant workers—a huge difference, to be sure. While “precarization has become ‘democratized,’” as Isabell Lorey notes, its distribution among social strata and geographical regions remains massively unequal, a disjunction underlined by both Lorey and Judith Butler (in Puar 2012:172, and 170–72).

Zheng Xiaoqiong’s verses point out the inequity: “statisticians compute numbers, bosses calculate profits, while I do overtime” in a factory producing “boxes and lids, [...] like coffin after coffin, / filled with my soul” (“In the Hardware Factory,” 131). Writing from a plastics factory, Ji Zhishui talks about “fruitless labor” (“Trial,” 181), about an unnecessarily grueling work that could be alleviated by hiring more workers to have shorter shifts, by automating so many procedures that could be automated, by producing less low-quality, cheap junk made to fall apart so people buy more. Whipping people hard just to produce “inferior goods” and “useless objects” demolishes a person’s self-respect (Zheng Xiaoqiong, “In the Hardware Factory,” 134, 135). Marx noted how “the worker becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces” ([1932] 1992:323). The cheaper the commodity made, the cheaper the lives of their makers. Wasting youth and losing fingers to make trinkets destined for the trash heap are realities experienced only by migrant workers in manufacture:

My finest five years went into the input feeder of a machine  
I watched those five youthful years come out of the machine's  
asshole—each formed into an elliptical plastic toy [...]  
(Xie Xiangnan, "Orders of the Front Lines," 79)

Graeber, however, points out that white-collar workers are also plagued by a nagging sense of the fruitlessness of their labor, and many types of employees suffer a pervasive "spiritual violence" from their structurally pointless exploitation (2018:40). Graeber stretches the accusation of labor exploitation across professions, with its common aim of "creating an insecure and overworked workforce" that does not have the energy to threaten established hierarchies (xxiii). Because of the breadth of superfluous labor, he argues, our current version of capitalism looks like a feudalized one since it's not concerned primarily with production as with redistributing the wealth made by underlings. Durand similarly advances the idea of a techno-feudalist capitalism, proposing that the biggest profits are made not from production but through expropriation. The "processes of predation" and mechanisms of coercive appropriation by companies backed up by political entities guarantee Big Tech intellectual monopolies, allow labor exploitation, and condone financialization (Durand 2022b:38). The feudal flavor didn't escape Xi Lizhi either, as when in his poem "Terracotta Army on the Assembly Line," he spoke of workers who quietly line up "silently awaiting their orders," and who once "the bell rings [are] sent back to the Qin" (196). Graeber's argument forges a solidarity among different types of workers, while at the same time not erasing the vast difference existing between employees who do nothing (valuable, at least) and workers who make (sometimes useless) things on the assembly line.

## My Two Hands Have Become Part of the Assembly Line

Because the discourse of progress is all-pervasive, a useful exercise during our online learning period drew direct parallels between the language in the poems and the language in Marx's texts, particularly in the chapter on "Estranged Labor" in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the section on "Intensification of Labor" in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume One*. The readings helped students understand the poets' grievances as well as their antimachine ethos so out of line with the techy-innovation jargon they are exposed to daily.

Marx explained how in an extractive, profit driven system, technical innovations tend to be geared towards both "getting more work done within a given period of time" and making people work more (Marx [1867] 1982:544). The industrial factory is a "system of machinery" of production lines that dictate the rhythm, manner, and duration of work (544). Whereas a person's energy levels naturally fluctuate, assembly lines never tire. So workers are forced to "adapt [their] own movements to the uniform and unceasing motion of the automaton" (546). Because a machine dictates their movements, workers cannot feel that they are using technology, but that "the machine makes use of [them]" (548). Marx's formulation that people become "living appendages" (546) to the machines is repeated by poet Chi Moshu as a rhetorical question: "Can it be that we and our lives / are mere accessories to the machines?" ("The South's Dilemma," in Qin 2016:142). Students discussed the differences and similarities to their own love-hate relationship with technology, to their phones as extensions of their beings, as sources of entertainment or communication, but also as means companies use to steal their time, to put them to work, generate content and make a profit for somebody else; as means through which they are manipulated, bullied, terrorized, controlled, and surveilled.

Technology appears in *Iron Moon* in the role of overlords prodding with "teeth, hammers, [and] daggers," with "blood-thirsty mouths / always ready to swallow" the time, energy, and lives of people interacting with them (Ji Zhishui, "Trial," 184, 181). Their bodies too. Many poems describe work accidents that happen when a tired person cannot keep up with the machine. Li Shougang, a poet who lost four fingers while working in a car garage, writes about the moment where "with a momentary slip of attention at the punch press / the flesh was mutilated" ("1993: Repair Shop in Jiangkou," 71). In addition, technology "does not free the worker from the work, but rather



deprives the work itself of all content” because assembly lines demand from each worker the repetition of a small set of tasks, all day, every day with “unvarying regularity” (Marx [1867] 1982:548, 549). Chen Caifeng expresses the monotony of factory work in his poem “Plastic Molding Factory”:

The plastic molding machine repeats  
the mechanical arms repeat  
we repeat adding materials, setting the molds, adjusting the machine  
Everything is repeated, we are repeated (98)

The result of wage-labor—which both Qin Xiaoyu and Marx call “forced labor” (Qin 2016:18; Marx [1932] 1992:326)—is a pervasive hurt. In their verses, the poets often refer to themselves as insignificant industrial objects like a screw, “a lump of iron” (Zhang Xiaoqiong, “In the Hardware Factory,” 128), “a component” (Chi Moshu, “In the Print Shop,” 151). They speak of their debiologization and loss of agency, of their bodily absorption into the factory, painting pictures of dismal cyborgian existence: “my name has been hidden by an employee ID / my two hands have become part of the assembly line, my body was signed over” (Zheng Xiaoqing, “Life,” 112). They speak of obliteration of names, of erasure of identities, of “shrink[ing] to four Arabic numerals / to be ordered around in the workshop” (Tiao Tiancai, “Employment ID,” 93). They cry with the rivers in which they dump their sweat together with “the chemical sewage [that] drains straight down to the sewers” (Chi Moschu, “The Baths at the Hardware factory,” 144).

Significantly, however, the poems depict processes of objectification that are never totalizing. The person glimmers through in surprising acts that illustrate agency and its political power to defy predictability. Wage-labor alienates a person from the object they’re making or maintaining, an object Marx depicts taking shape as a “hostile and powerful object which is independent of [the worker]” (Marx [1932] 1992:331). Yet a poem like “Sundress” shows the author, Wu Xia, forging a positive emotional connection with the object she’s responsible for, a dress, despite the fact that she is made to iron such garments for interminable hours. The affection Wu Xia shows for a dress she gently presses and pleats reads as even more heartbreaking, since she will never be able to wear such an expensive outfit. But Wu Xia clings to warm feelings while imagining a girl who *will* wear the dress, a girl she chose to care for in preparing her outfit, a girl she sends the dress to as a love letter:

Soon when I get off work  
I’ll wash my sweaty uniform  
and the sundress will be packed and shipped  
to a fashionable store  
it will wait just for you  
unknown girl  
I love you (165)

Wu Xia’s perspective corrects one of the limitations of classical Marxism towards imagining what Jasbir Puar calls “richer forms of interdependence, vulnerability, and generosity” among humans, animals, and objects; between living and inanimate entities (2012:174). For one, how would we treat objects that we buy if we were able to imagine that each is a gift given to us from someone who loves us and whom we love in return? “Sundress” and like poems helped my students avoid a one-note performance. We didn’t want to make a show about “humans” vs. “machines,” about robotized individuals reduced to things. We made a show about the huge pressures put on us to become desensitized to violence and our individual and collective powers to resist them.

### **The Worktable Is Like a Stage, My Hands and Feet Dance**

Once we entered into a conversation with the poems, we began investigating them as performance texts. Expectedly, poems about labor brim with instructions for movement direction, quality, and speed. Verses describe precise hand gestures and full-bodied actions, often in concert with other

people or things: “one screw two screws turning to the left to the right” (Zheng Xiaoqiong, “Woman Worker: Youth Pinned to a Station,” 124). Inner or outer compulsions to repeat movements and gestures are the norm, sometimes for durations that lead to exhaustion. Movements typically string together in sequences of at least two gestures that repeat, in “series of stiff motions” (Chen Caifeng, “Under Fluorescent Lights,” 96). The quality and speed of movements range from fast, highly rhythmic, robotic, “rigid movements, pursued and hurried on by product after product” (Chen Caifeng, “The Women,” 95) to slower, gentler, more delicate gestures, as when Wu Xia irons dresses; to syncopated movements struggling to keep up, paired with “exhausted eyes above the workstations [and] a gradually exhausted heart” (Zheng Xiaoqiong, “They,” 115). In the latter, the corporeal need to slow down sometimes results in missing a choreographed step and losing a finger, which in turn leads to a sudden but brief halt. Many poems on their own read as dance scores, such as when breaking down the different steps of a group of people making things on the production line:

each color and each person takes two to six turns to finish  
 each turn is another printing  
 two to six turns to  
 print, print  
 print, print, print, print, print, print,  
 hey, six workers taking turns [...]  
 brush, brush brush brush, our sweat flows into the six colors  
 (Chi Moshu, “In the Print Shop,” 151–52)

While the merciless rhythm and endlessly looped scores negatively impact in time the corporeal range and the clarity of gesture (and in years’ time deform bodies), every movement executed by a rested worker enacts an action perfected to maximum precision and effectiveness, similar to the way in which an athlete or a dancer knows how to conserve and stretch energy, how to hit a mark. Chen Caifeng reveals the aesthetic dimension of work when he writes, “the worktable / is like a stage, [where] hands and feet dance / rifling through things” (“Plastic Molding Factory,” 98). There’s a grace to these movements, until it is lost to coercion, until the movements must be performed painfully beyond a body’s limit and in toxic conditions:

I once thought of printing  
 as an elegant patterning, born of my hands  
 flashing across an athletic field, even an Olympic field  
 imagine the beauty of movement  
 up until my clothing was soaked with ink and solvent (Chi Moshu, “In the Print Shop,” 149)

There’s a pride of mastery in these movements—until the working performer loses agency over their body. Once your body becomes a commodified “it” at the mercy of external command, the quality of movement shifts to defeat and anger: “tell it to spin, it spins / tell it to stop, it stops” (Tang Yihong, “Mixer,” 54). As André Lepecki explains, choreography is an artistic discipline shaped as part of a modern project of regulating relations, hierarchies, and behaviors, “as a technology that creates a body disciplined to move according to the commands of writing” (2006:6). William Forsythe, during a talk at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in 2003, described choreography as a computational language, as a command practice where one person (the choreographer) controls other people’s movements (dancers) (in Franko 2006:8). Art and work thus share hierarchical structures of obedience.

I didn’t want to replicate such structures in our production, so I didn’t impose a choreography for our show. Instead, I did my best to set up students and give them the tools and the confidence to devise their own scenes. To make their collaboration manageable, I asked both classes of 20 students each to divide themselves in groups of three to six people. I prepared 10 different scripts of one to two pages each that mixed fragments from various poems that groups could choose from. I blended poetry fragments to discourage students from too literal interpretations and

purely story-driven approaches. We didn't discuss the meaning of their scenes to allow them the freedom to take their scenes in novel directions.

Once students returned to campus after the Covid lockdown, we began to prepare for our live performance, scheduled to be held one time on school premises. We didn't work with the texts right away. Instead, we explored physical theatre building blocks, which we later used to delve differently into the ideas, states, and feelings that we had discussed via Teams. Frantic Assembly's exercises, such as Push Hands (where two people travel in space through negotiating contact via their two outstretched hands, one on top of each other), were particularly useful for learning how to physically communicate with a partner and move together without any use of words (Graham and Hoggett [2009] 2014:106). Choreographer and movement director Jackie Snow's High-Low exercise was instrumental in giving students a sense of physical ensemble work. High, low, up, down, wide, narrow, forward, and back are simple instructions for bodies to go as high, or as wide, or as backwards as they can (Snow 2012:19–21). I like this exercise because of its infinite variations, since the manner in which a body goes down or forward is entirely up to the individual, leading with any bodily part. For mirror work then, when a partner or an ensemble follows a leader, they don't need to copy movements but to recognize impulses and follow them in their own way. A roomful of students moving together but each in their own way—from narrow to down to wide—visually communicates both connections among parts of a whole and a sense of each performer's individuality. Another variation asks performers to “rebel” against a leader, as in go forward when the leader goes backwards. Another variation asks a group to perform as a single creature, a single body attempting to go down or narrow together, on their own or in response to a leader or group. Many student scenes integrated similar approaches when performing workers in assembly lines, all tied to the same task, but all performing it with varying degrees of difference. This in turn communicated both the uniformization imposed on workers and the impossibility of its total success.

Students began to trust the communicative power of movement. Frantic Assembly again was very useful in showing students how clean, clear, and even simple movements and gestures do not need the addition of overly emoting facial expressions to deliver an impactful meaning. We also used the building block exercises Chair Duets, Hymn Hands, and Round By Through (franticassembly 2016; National Theatre 2015), as well as Rash Dash's Under & Over (National Theatre 2017) to practice building movement sequences. All these exercises involve simple instructions where partners take turns to move a part of their body or their partners' bodies in relation to their partners' previous movements. In Hymn Hands, partners take turns to move one hand (theirs or their partner's) and place it on the top half of their or their partner's body. In Under & Over partners take turns to move their body or a part of it under or over their partner's body or part of it. Exercises encourage students to rely on touch, care, attention, and physical cues in order to move. They also reduce the pressure to invent material beforehand, and by removing much of the process of students talking to decide what to do (where some student's voices are dominant), they offer more opportunities for nonhierarchical, ensemble devised work. With practice and growing trust, students used the same building blocks to come up with increasingly complex movement sequences when given starting prompts from the ideas, states, and feelings related to literary and theoretical texts on labor: commodification, objectification, production line, tiredness, overtime, wage labor, care, interdependency, love for someone you never met. In class, students built and practiced sequences that I encouraged them to explore further by varying speed, tension, direction of vision, or by introducing a certain number of changes within a sequence, as in a switch in rhythm. Groups would periodically present material to the other groups for feedback sessions in which the audience shared with the performers what feelings and thoughts they had while watching the sequence.

Once groups cohered into ensembles and became proficient with using physical language, we reintroduced the texts, using both the English translation and the original Mandarin. I advised students to use one or two lines of text per movement sequence. They could use or adapt sequences they already developed, and generate additional ones as needed. Stringing together all the sequences was a time-consuming process during which I helped groups explore different orders of material and, once settled on a particular order, design smooth transitions. Depending on the

number of people in a group, on the length of text, and on the length of physical sequences, the resulting scenes ended up being from 7 to 12 minutes in length. In our live audience performance, we simply showed one scene after another.

Putting together words and movement wasn't easy. Performers found it difficult to move according to a choreography on a set timing and simultaneously say lines in a different cadence. We solved this issue by deciding that lines of text should be said by a performer only when not engaged in a particularly difficult choreography. This worked well since all groups had duet sequences and moments when one or two performers were not engaged in big actions. I encouraged playfulness with the language too, with parts that could be echoed and repeated in concert with movements or without movement, so that even performers busy keeping rhythm in complex choreographies could still utter sounds and words without having to worry about culling from memory long strings of words. We also played with the two different languages that students could mix and layer in their performances.

Having performers largely silent when engaged in arduous physical tasks matched the observations we made about the nature of sound in the poems. Many *Iron Moon* poems read as loud, set in the deafening din of factory machines making “noises / of cutting / polishing / drilling / striking” (Zheng Xiaoqiong, “Witnessed,” 120). There are “different qualities of amps” (Xie Xiangnan, “You Have to Sit Down and Get Used to Such Sounds,” 78) mangled in concertos of “piercing, earsplitting” uproar (Chi Moshu, “Severed Finger, No Sound of Crying,” 156). These depictions of cacophonous loudness suggested that performers use their voices not just to utter intelligible words, but also to mimic repetitive, industrial sounds:

Bang bang bang  
the sound of impact extrusion  
ka ka ka  
the sound of the cutter  
zi zi zi  
the sound of a catch  
zi—ka—bang (Chi Moshu, “Severed Finger, No Sound of Crying,” 159)

At the same time, though, the human protagonists working amid the machines in the poems are reduced to silence. For one reason, tiredness along with the mechanical noise renders voices superfluous: “there’s nothing to say under fluorescent lights / there’s only the overwhelming thundering of the machines” (Ji Zhishui, “Trial,” 179). Design-wise, we had no machines on- or offstage making noises. Because of Covid restrictions, we had to perform outside, in an open-air stone amphitheater. This gave students the chance to test the power of their bodies alone in performance, without the added drama of light and sound design. Performers had only their bodies and voices in broad daylight. Any sound had to be made live and by physical means. Some groups made noises by beatboxing, clapping, snapping, or striking their bodies. Some groups brought loud metal objects, such as a Chinese gong, that they banged. One group used a metronome that click-clacked counting time and maliciously pushed the performers to work faster.

Silent figures also populate the *Iron Moon* poems because “workers are frightened into silence” (Ji Zhishui, “Trial,” 181) by domineering supervisors, by years of abuse, by the threat of a layoff. Even when poems relate work accidents resulting in gruesome physical injuries, the victim never screams from fear of being fired: “no one cries in pain [...] No one dares cry out” (Tang Yihong, “Tear-filled Paradise,” 55). Unbearable levels of noise and depths of muteness—“my father says less and less” (Ji Zhishui, “Trial,” 177)—confront one another dialectically. The silent workers in *Iron Moon* are anything but speechless, their pain and revolt speaking volumes. “My body carries three tons of dynamite” (“Demolitions Mark,” 60) writes Chen Nianxi, spelling out the shared goal of our physical performance to reverberate with and mobilize the poets’ voices, to embody the resounding silence.

## Rip Open the Silence of This Era

In his poem “I Speak of Blood,” Xu Lizhi says that he writes poems while his “voice goes hoarse” so as to “rip open the silence of this era” (194) surrounding the irreversible, unnecessary hurt and degradation we inflict on social and natural worlds. As I began to write this article in November 2022, 8 years after Xu Lizhi died by suicide, and 10 years after the Mike Daisey/Foxconn scandal in the US, thousands of workers at the Foxconn Zhengzhou plant in Henan were protesting the 10-hour days, 7-day work week, as well as undelivered bonuses for risking safety in a factory with a Covid-19 outbreak in a city entering lockdown. They were met on the street by riot control special police units in hazmat suits raining down tear gas and baton blows. A worker showing up on the street in solidarity with the cheated employees tells CNN reporters: “If today I remain silent about the suffering of others, who will speak out for me tomorrow?” (Gan and Liu 2022).

My 10th-grade students performed their scenes to a small audience of their friends and some teachers. Performers mobilized migrant workers’ poetry and were encouraged to use their bodies not just as a means of illustrating text, but “to express what is not said verbally” (Graham and Hoggett [2009] 2014:177). Some scenes communicated the students’ own criticism, anger, and solidarity with the workers. Some scenes appropriated the text to talk about the stress and pressure they feel as students. Both are valid outcomes, since both activate a sense of interconnection with a larger outside world. The process of staging the poems stimulated cognitive enaction, an embodied way of getting to know about others as connected to self. We tested the disembodied, concept-based understanding of labor through physicalized interrogations, an embodiment process that “can cut the chain of habitual thought patterns [...], open to possibilities other than those contained in one’s current representations of the life space” (Varela et al. [1992] 2017:27). One such possibility opened by chance during the show.

As the performance was unfolding, three kitchen prep workers pushing a plastic cart laden with cookware and ingredients moved right through the backstage of our outdoor stage. The loud rumbling of the cheap cart on the pavement invaded the performance minutes before the audience could even see the workers, and lingered minutes after they left the field of vision. I hope that in that moment participants resisted a habitual reaction and instead of perceiving the cart as an intrusion within our segregated spaces and roles (and ideas of art), they welcomed the occurrence. And not just aesthetically, as a felicitous added backdrop of extras and work-related sound design, but politically too, as a brief redress within policed divisions. Borrowing Lepecki’s terminology (2013), this shift in perception would signal a possibility to move from choreopolice to choreopolitics. Whereas “choreopolice” is the domineering practice of regulating movement in spaces and ordering who can be where and how, “choreopolitics” implies self-directed movement, organizing ourselves in space in order to resist and redress injustice. Lepecki writes about learning to move politically even in policed spaces. When we planned the show, we wanted to invite our campus staff to watch the performance. But navigating the bureaucracy to convince managers to let the workers watch theatre during their shifts was forbidding. And very likely, the staff would have the same workload, meaning that they would need to finish faster after (possibly reluctantly) being made to waste time on viewing theatre. We could not budge the choreopolice’s distribution of bodies and enforced divisions. But realities are too big and unwieldy for anyone or anything to enforce total control. As Walter Benjamin put it, every point in time is a given and usually missed opportunity, an opening portal towards another world. Learning how to step through it, learning how to move politically is choreopolitics, a mobilizing process that short-circuits external control mechanisms and internalized policing.

Neither going faster to exit the performance radius, nor going slower to see more of the performance, the three workers look over at the students flinging themselves about and talking about work, much of it in a foreign language. They make food for these kids, while someone else has to make food for their own children, since they cannot leave a campus operating in a closed-loop system. Two kitchen ladies glance over indifferently. One kitchen lady smiles.

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