Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies 49.2
September 2023: 71-92
DOI: 10.6240/concentric.lit.202309_49(2).0005

Working-Class Identity between Sincerity and Authenticity: From Wanchun Hu to Lijia Zhang*

Luka Lei Zhang
Department of English
University of Macau, China

Abstract

This paper examines two Chinese working-class writers: Wanchun Hu (1929-98) and Lijia Zhang (1964-). With a focus on their working-class identity and its relation to their literary works, I discuss their struggles with what Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D'Ambrosio refer to as different "identity technologies" and related internal and external conflicts. The specific identity technologies in question are those defined by Moeller and D'Ambrosio as role-related "sincerity" and individuality-oriented "authenticity." First, I offer a brief history of Chinese working-class literature to illustrate how "literature for the proletariat" was transformed into literature "by the real working class." I then discuss Hu's literary works and unpack his class identity formation under the regime of sincerity. I finish by looking at Zhang's undoing of her working-class background and experience to develop a different selfhood in authenticity. I argue that these two authors are shaped by different identity technologies in contrasting ways, resulting in different Chinese working-class writings.

Keywords

class identity, working-class literature, Chinese literature, identity technology, sincerity, authenticity

* I sincerely thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Introduction

The question of what a "real" working-class writer or an "authentic" working-class text is has always been an issue in the history of working-class literature. In the context of the rise of "identity politics" in Europe and North America, many scholars have reflected on this question again, and Magnus Nilsson and John Lennon even speak critically of a "focus on *a fetishized working-class identity*" (42; emphasis added). While most scholars believe that class and experience play an important role in creative writing, some fear that focusing too strongly on identity can lead to an essentialist understanding of literature.

The renewed problem of identity, however, not only concerns "Western" working-class literature. With working-class writers reentering the cultural scene in contemporary China, the factor of identity remains a major issue there as well. In this essay, I examine two contemporary Chinese authors and their texts with a focus on their different ways of identifying themselves as a working-class writer. In showing their struggles with different "identity technologies" (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 20) and their related internal and external conflicts, I intend to illustrate not only the specific predicaments of producing working-class literature but also reflect on the issue of identity as a broader literary and cultural concern. The specific identity technologies in question here are those defined as role-related "sincerity" and individuality-oriented "authenticity" by Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D'Ambrosio. I will explore how these technologies contributed to shaping the class identity of these two Chinese working-class writers in contrasting ways.

Identity Has Always Been Important: A Brief History of Literature for the Proletariat to Literature by the Real Working Class

Under the influence of the newly established Soviet Union, young Chinese Marxist intellectuals created and promoted proletarian literature in China in the 1920s. In line with this revolutionary ethos, the establishment of the League of Left-Wing Writers in 1930 represents a shift in Chinese literature "from a petty-bourgeois to a predominantly proletarian perspective" (Gotz 20). The League offered a platform for writers discussing proletarian literature and supported them to produce literature accordingly. Under the influence of the League, a number of writers devoted themselves to portraying peasants and workers. However, the question arose whether intellectuals could accurately take on a proletarian perspective. The author Mao Dun,

for instance, "was disgusted by the sloganeering billboard style of such writing and correctly observed that, though it called itself proletarian, 'it neither expresses the ideology of the proletariat nor is intelligible to them'" (Holock and Tsau Holock 5). Mao Dun's point is credible because the majority of proletarians in China remained illiterate. Proletarian literature at that time seems to have served mainly as a vehicle for Marxist theories and revolutionary ideas while literary engagement with actual proletarians was still often missing.

The important left-wing writer Qiubai Qu (1899-1935) also retained a pessimistic view of the proletarian literary movement in the Chinese context, considering "the new generation of revolutionary writers as a Westernized elite, producing works for their kind and alienated from any mass audience due to their class (petty-bourgeois), their language (Europeanized vernacular), and the inaccessibility of their writings" (King 20). One could argue that in the 1920s and 1930s, the movement that produced and promoted proletarian literature, or working-class literature, mainly consisted of progressive elites struggling for position within the general literary field as left-wing writers. The idea of working-class literature in the 1920s and 1930s mainly stands for the representation *of* the working class by intellectuals and writers. The emergence of working-class literature within China bears a significant resemblance to the initial development of working-class literature in various other nations, including Finland: "The writers who formed the emerging network of Finnish working-class literature came from different strata of the society but shared an interest in creating an alternative to bourgeois culture" (Hyttinen and Launis 68).

While left-wing writers debated Marxist theories and proletarian literature in Shanghai, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was working on policies to advance "real" proletarians from both urban and rural areas. With Mao Zedong's establishment as core leader, the CCP had strengthened itself for more than a decade while contesting the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) Party and the Japanese invasion. In the early 1940s, Mao advised the CCP to "go to the masses" (到群眾中去 *dao qunzhong zhong qu*) and to "learn from the masses" (向群眾學習 *xiang qunzhong xuexi*). This direction exerted a substantial impact on the cultural scene, particularly on the development of proletarian literature in the 1940s and afterwards.

In 1942, Mao organized the "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art," affirming that apart from the military fronts, "We still need a cultural army, since this kind of army is indispensable in achieving unity among ourselves and winning victory over the enemy" (57). With Mao's determination to develop a "cultural army," the CCP was supposed to take charge of cultural practices. As

Michael Louis Gotz observes, with his talks in Yan'an Mao "had virtually adopted the entire Soviet body of theory on this subject" (11). In these talks, Mao continually refers to Marx and Lenin, outlining a body of tenets for writers, party members, and communist intellectuals regarding how they should dedicate themselves to "mass culture" (59). Moreover, Mao remarks disapprovingly that during the "Shanghai period" of proletarian literature in the 1920s and 1930s, "the audience for revolutionary works of literature and art consisted primarily of students, office workers, and shop assistants" (59) and maintains that many of these writers were fundamentally unfamiliar with the real life of the proletarians. He believed that this was a deep-rooted problem and accordingly proposed that intellectuals and writers promote literature and art for and by the "the masses": namely, workers, peasants, and soldiers. Thus, the label of "workers, peasants, and soldiers' literature" (工農兵文學 *gongnongbing wenxue*) was promoted. Under this classification, non-urban peasants and revolutionary soldiers were included alongside workers into the literary field. Moreover, Mao stipulated that literature and art were inseparable parts of the proletarian liberation movement; they were supposed to be subordinated to politics. He noticeably highlighted that "revolutionary literature" was a significant element of proletarian literature. It becomes clear that, by stressing this, Mao and the CCP primarily aimed at making proletarian literature a means to awaken the masses to a particular ideology and to incite class struggle.

In this way, the CCP's sweeping intervention in literature and art was established. As Kirk A. Denton explains, "the Party attempted to impose literary uniformity in two primary ways: institutions and cultural campaigns. The publishing industry was nationalized and journals were brought under state control" (297). The Party prescribed that proletarian literature should fit the specific genre of "socialist realism," which had served as the primary literary genre in the Soviet Union since 1932. As Gotz states, "Socialist Realism became the guiding principle for Chinese literary creation from the early 1940s to around 1958" (11). Unlike in the 1920s and 1930s, when individual intellectuals were at the helm of the League, the CCP had now seized control over cultural practices. In one of his talks, Mao specifies that "our literature and art are in the first place for the workers, the class that leads the revolution" (65). The socialist realism favored by Party officialdom was *for* the working-class in the sense of playing a critical role in the proletarian liberation movement. The transformation of "proletarian literature" into orthodox socialist realism made it a force for contesting "feudal, bourgeois, petty bourgeois, liberalist, individualist, nihilist, [and] art-for-art's sake" arts (Mao 83).

In October 1949, Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The CCP's authority over China had been almost entirely consolidated. With regards to the development of proletarian literature, no matter how "revolutionary" it was in intent, there remained a problem, as Lars Ragvald states:

> The fact that the Chinese Communist revolution since the thirties had been out of real contact with the city proletariat became a serious problem for literary creation in the fifties. The Chinese Communist movement had not produced its Gorky; in fact, none of its writers had a working-class background or sufficient experience of working-class life to be able to portray it from the "inside." (301-02)

As Ragvald makes clear, the creation of and debates over proletarian literature had indeed largely depended on intellectuals from the Chinese bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. Some writers had a working-class background but transformed their class position through education when they allied themselves with the CCP. In any case, the primary concern within the debates on Chinese proletarian literature was whether writers were capable of representing "real" working-class life from the perspective of "real" workers. With Mao's promulgation of socialist realism, the concern for such a "truthful" depiction of working-class experiences intensified.

In the young, impoverished PRC of 1949, the major efforts of the CCP were focused on the reconstruction of industry. In 1952, the first Five Year Plan for economic development was pronounced by the Party, primarily aiming at the production of steel and coal. Mass industrialization rapidly increased the number of industrial workers across the country. Along with this fervent pursuit of economic production, the literary field was encouraged to match the rhythm. Under its embrace of socialist realism, the CCP deployed several key strategies. Intellectuals and writers were expected to involve themselves with laboring and gain a better understanding of proletarian life. Moreover, the CCP reached out to factories to promote "working-class literature" and "train a nucleus of amateur writers among the workers so as to popularize literature in the factories" (Ragvald 304). In light of these efforts, a crop of worker-writers emerged from various factories. During this time, the CCP's strategies were almost identical to those of the Soviet Union during its first Five Year Plan: "In a reversal of status within culture, workers were to become writers, and writers were to attempt to merge with the working classes" (Clark 15). This state-enforced ideological training led to the production of diligent and popular worker-

writers in the 1950s and 1960s, and working-class literature during this period highlighted the writers' working-class identities. One example of such a devoted writer is the prolific Wanchun Hu.

Under Conditions of Sincerity: Worker-Writer Wanchun Hu

In *You and Your Profile: Identity after Authenticity*, Moeller and D'Ambrosio elucidate that

> In earlier times, identity was typically assigned by the social roles one was born into. . . . Identification then typically consisted in committing to the roles people found themselves in by embracing the norms and internalizing the values attached to these roles. This is what we call, following Lionel Trilling, "sincerity": a mental and social method of achieving identity based on sincere role enactment. (10)

In other words, the authors view "sincerity" as a method of achieving and shaping identity, which implies "recognizing that social role encumbrances make us who we are" (139). Using sincerity to achieve and shape a specifically working-class identity underlies Wanchun Hu's initial transformation from worker to writer. He committed himself to being a socialist worker-writer and constantly lived up to its role expectations during the 1950s. We clearly see, in one of his publications from 1959, how he identifies himself and the expectations it generates: "I am one of the steelworkers, and I have the responsibility of representing the new workers and stories from the steel factory. If I didn't write, I would feel that I owed the Party a debt. I would feel very sorry to my working-class brothers" (*Who* i). Here, Hu not only states his well-formed class identity but also highlights his role and responsibility as a working-class writer.

It was in part due to the CCP's intervention that Hu developed into a writer and formed his class identity. As a young man, he was influenced by the Party's communist ideological training, which developed his literary creations by setting up his political and literary expectations. Born in 1929 to a poor family, Hu received little education. Yet he became a prolific worker-writer who published extensively over four decades. His literary output ranges from short stories, essays, and novels to film scripts. After 1949, when the CCP's authority over China was consolidated, the industrialization of the nation became the primary goal. Factories were now state-owned, and a massive body of workers was recruited. In 1951, Hu got published for

the first time in a newspaper, the *Laodong Daily* (勞動報 *Laodong bao*), where he was featured as a worker-writer from a state-owned factory in Shanghai. He recounts in a very detailed way the writing process and experience of his first publication in his book *How Did I Learn to Write* (我怎樣學習創作 *Wo zenyang xuexi chuangzuo*), saying that the publication totally enlightened the course of his writing career. In 1950, a journalist from the *Laodong Daily* came to Hu's factory to report on the life of the workers. As one of the committee members of the trade union, Hu shared his experiences with the journalist. Instead of writing a report *about* the workers, the journalist published the story in the newspaper with Hu's name, marking it as a piece *from* a "real" factory worker. When the story was published, many co-workers read it and praised Hu as "the literati" of the factory. While encouraged by this, Hu also felt unsettled and guilty. He confesses that "I didn't write this piece. Especially since after this piece about the workers got published, the factory workers were greatly inspired. I think it is so meaningful that a report can have such an impact" (*How* 33). After this experience, Hu worked hard to improve his creative skills. In the same year, he came across Maxim Gorky's *My Childhood* in a bookstall. Reading it gave him the idea to write a similar account about his childhood. Importantly, he identified himself with Gorky: "Gorky also was a poor child who didn't read plenty of books" (*How* 25).

From 1951 to 1956, Hu immersed himself in reading and studying literature while he worked in a steel factory. In 1952, he endeavored to write some short stories and published them in various newspapers in Shanghai, such as *The Standard* (文匯報 *Wenhui bao*) and the *Laodong Daily*. His stories from this period—for instance, "Repair the Rolling Machine" (修好軋鋼車 "Xiuhao zhagangche") and "A Man Who Works for His Ideals" (為理想而工作的人 "Wei lixiang er gongzuo de ren")—employ simple yet vivid language that realistically describes factory life based on his own experiences. He regarded this period as a critical learning process, not only in writing but also in reading a wide range of authors. In his later work, Hu discloses the process of "publicizing" his stories: "The newspaper editors patiently read and revised my manuscripts. They revised them again and again until they could be published. The experienced writer Jinzhi Wei (魏金枝) read plenty of my works. He talked to me very often and helped me greatly" (*How* 27). It seems once more that for many aspiring working-class writers, "professional" revision is an inevitable process. Apart from being helped by experienced writers and editors, Hu was also asked by the CCP secretary to join the Shanghai Workers Literature group, where he "acquired the basic knowledge of literature and art, and, more importantly . . . learned about Chairman Mao's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art' and

the Party's principles on literature and art, knowing who literature should serve and how to serve them" (*How* 26). Clearly, CCP-organized meetings and seminars exerted a substantial impact on Hu's early literary practices, particularly his outlook on the concept of literature and his role as a writer.

Meanwhile, Hu was gaining "a Marxist-Leninist outlook to understand and analyze the experience of life." In his later works, he often recalls studying the Marxist theory of surplus value in a CCP-assigned seminar. Here, he learned about "the secret of capitalist exploitation" and understood the systematic relation between bosses and workers, which was not just about workers getting paid for their labor. Instead, "I realized that as long as there is a class, there are exploitations. Before the liberation, we workers were the oppressed class since we were the exploited class" (*How* 28). He also explains that before his training, his love and hatred toward other people were "instinctive," that is, "I hated my boss because he beat my co-worker and didn't even give us enough food and clothes. This kind of hatred is instinctive" (*How* 93). Acquiring Marxist theory extended his writings beyond such "instinctive" emotions, moving them into a new direction anchored in a collective class perspective. His worker's identity was formed in the political sense.

Hu explains that whereas he used to regard his family sufferings as personal misfortunes, his newly gained class perspective transformed his and other poor people's anguish into a sociopolitical and systematic issue. The realization of the exploitative relationship between different classes compelled him to write down his childhood experiences and share them with other working-class readers. The story *Flesh and Bones* is based on the real-life story of his parents having to sell Hu's young brother to a rich landlord to pay off a debt in the 1920s. The title, *Flesh and Bones* (骨肉 *Gurou*), is a metaphoric expression in Chinese for one's child or children. Hu uses this expression to refer to poor people's children in particular, showing how rich people not only exploit the working-class but also take their children away. This publication won Hu massive attention both at home and abroad for its vivid portraits of toiling people oppressed by the wealthy in China during the 1920s. The story was recognized and revised by the aforementioned writer Jinzhi Wei. It was first published in 1956 by the Shanghai journal *Literature & Art Monthly* (文藝月報 *Wenyi yüebao*). In the same year, Hu was invited to join the Shanghai Writers' Union (上海作協 *Shanghai zuo xie*). The Writers' Union, an important cultural institution at this time, not only recognized him as a professional writer but also enforced censorship on his works. Michel Hockx explains that it provided "writers with a steady income, housing, and social benefits in return for their loyalty to party principles concerning literature. The system has consolidated the status and

well-being of writers, but it has also restricted their freedom, especially at times of extreme ideological pressure" (317). Hu's writings from this period were indeed loyal to "party principles" with respect to his literary aesthetics and ideological messages.

In 1956, Hu's first short story collection, *Youth* (青春 *Qingchun*), was published by the Chinese Youths Publishing House in Beijing. Eleven short stories are gathered in the collection, including his most renowned and well-studied piece, *Flesh and Bones*. Apart from *Flesh and Bones*, all the stories depict factory workers in the early 1950s in a socialist realist manner. The language is concise and conventional (as the targeted readers are his working-class fellows), and he writes predominantly in an uplifting tone. These stories strive to depict a representative image of the "new and good" type of workers emerging from the young nation. Hu frequently employs contrasts to differentiate this new type of worker from the "old and problematic" one. Indeed, as Gotz points out, Hu "portrays the 'socialist men' of his day" (252). For Hu, these "socialist men" are diligent workers who firmly dedicate themselves to the construction of a socialist new China under the leadership of the CCP. In the preface to *Who Is the Maker of the Miracle*, he states, "In my book, I wrote about a great number of ordinary workers. I think in this way I answered the question of the book title" (ii). In his works from this period, Hu often expresses his deep-rooted pride in being a worker and an innate sense of belonging to the working class.

This sense of class identity and pride matches what Moeller and D'Ambrosio call the identity technology of sincerity: "Under conditions of role-based sincerity, identity is achieved by conforming to 'external powers' as manifested in pre-established relationships, norms, and customs. Identity value and moral credit is generated through 'obedient service' in the form of compliance with social expectations and role-based interactions with others" (141). To achieve and shape his worker-writer identity, Hu constantly conformed to "external powers," such as the CCP's ideological guidance, revisions by professional editors, the expectations of his fellow working-class readers, and the literary tradition of socialist realism. In this way, his commitment to and identification with the role of worker-writer "ground[s] [his] sense of selfhood and become[s] a major source of meaning and significance" (142). However, this strong sense of identity and pride did not last forever. After the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Hu only began writing again in 1979. From the early 1980s, he transformed his identity as well as his literary style. Moeller and D'Ambrosio describe a paradox of sincerity: "The more we develop our identity and the more role relations we engage in, the more role conflicts tend to evolve, some

of them perhaps quite tragic," and "eventually we may realize that the regime of sincerity itself—its norms and laws, social institutions (the 'family') and belief systems (ideologies and religions)—is a major factor making life, and our identity, more complex, more difficult to integrate, and more 'unnatural'" (152). Indeed, as Hu's journey progressed, he encountered more conflicts within the "regime of sincerity" that turned his writings in a new direction. These conflicts became a major influence on both his literary texts and practices.

In these new works of the 1980s, Hu portrays a drastic change in the attitude of the working class toward the CCP and draws attention to conflicts between different ideologies. The Party was no longer considered the righteous and leading force that it had been in the 1950s. Along with the image of the CCP, traditional class consciousness began to collapse as the working class witnessed the decline of the socialist spirit and dream. The working class no longer viewed itself as the leading class of a country led by a truly communist party. From 1985 onwards, Hu increasingly disassociated himself from the worker-writer identity that had defined him over the past three decades. Instead, he started to identify himself with the writing techniques of "pure literature"[1] and published urban romance and popular novels. *Love Monster* (情魔 *Qingmo*) and *The Female Thief* (女賊 *Nüzei*), both published in 1988, show a further development of Hu's literary style and document major intellectual adjustments. In Hu's words, "I am a writer who cares a lot about the readership, because they are the people and the god" (*The Female Thief* 302). Moreover, he finds that his previous writings are restricted. His attitude toward the working class and its relation to society has changed significantly in texts such as *Love Monster*. He seems to have reconciled himself to a society where "market economy" policies have been implemented by the government. Consequently, conflicts between the working class and the wealthy are downplayed in his fiction, which puts *Love Monster* in stark contrast to *Flesh and Bones* from 1965. The social shift from communism to capitalism that began to characterize Hu's literature eventually characterized Hu himself—he became a businessman. In 1992, he adjusted his identity once more, heading to Vietnam to conduct a rosewood business.

As a working-class writer, Wanchun Hu's class identity and writing career were formed within a regime of sincerity. His committed role as a socialist worker-writer

---

[1] Yunlei Li provides a comprehensive definition of "pure literature" (純文學 *chun wenxue*) in Chinese literary history: "Pure literature has, since the 1980s, dominated Chinese literature with three attributes: (1) its emphasis on external and formal properties such as narrative forms and techniques, (2) its focus on the affective aspects of the inner world while eluding reality, and (3) its stress on studying and emulating Western modernism and other latest trends in the West" (175-76).

determined his representation of the working class. However, the regime of sincerity eventually collapsed along with his political certainty, forcing him to transform both his identity and writing. His eventual departure from the working class and the CCP—which in a sense departed from itself—reminds us of the complex nature of both working-class writing and identity.

An Authentic Worker's Story: Lijia Zhang and *A Worker's Memoir*

Moeller and D'Ambrosio explain the emergence of the identity technology of "authenticity" in this way:

> Social mobility increased, and people began to exercise a higher degree of choice regarding, for instance, their profession, their marriage, or their religion. This posed a challenge to traditional role allegiance. . . . Traditional role identities pre-scribed by society began to appear as external facades imposed on people whose real self was to be found somewhere underneath. The conception of the social role as a "mask" covering up one's true identity became a prime metaphor along with the newly emerging quest for what now seemed to be the foundation of identity: authenticity. (28)

In recent decades, the discovery of one's "authentic" self has become one of the most important aspects of building a personal identity for more and more people, including in the working class. Moreover, in the diagnosis of authenticity as an identity formation method, Moeller and D'Ambrosio argue that "modern authenticity and individualism blossomed when personal autonomy and creativity became identity ideals." Individualism, in their view, serves as "a facet of authenticity" (168). In the Chinese context, with the rapid economic development and political changes of the 1980s, class identity was no longer the same as in the 1950s. The socialist ethos faded away, and individualistic and "modern" beliefs became more prevalent. Some writers began moving away from the "traditional role identities pre-scribed by society" in an attempt to become "free" and write "authentic" stories. They believed that literature should not be informed by communist ideological or stylistic restrictions but should tell "true" stories from personal perspectives.

According to Moeller and D'Ambrosio, "in authenticity, one's face is expected to accurately express one's actual self. A mask that is no mask, one's true self has to

be found or created" (13). Unlike Hu's class formation as a worker-writer, Zhang and her writing exhibit her continuous resistance to being a worker and the pursuit of her dream of becoming a journalist or novelist. Although Zhang was born into a worker's family and was expected to become a worker, she views worker identity only as an imposed occupation. Instead, she longs for a life that allows her to be herself. In her writings and through her resistance to a collective working-class identity, she aims at the establishment of an individualist, liberal, female selfhood. In particular, her book *"Socialism Is Great!": A Worker's Memoir of the New China* serves as a powerful example of the transition from sincerity to authenticity. It shows how, as Moeller and D'Ambrosio write, "in authenticity, along with its inward turn on the quest for identity, a shift from role ethics to an individualist ethics takes place" (27). Zhang certainly holds individualist beliefs and has struggled against a collective working-class identity, feeling that she was forced to be a worker against her personal wishes. In distinction from Hu's work, her writings demonstrate opposition against, in her view, a repressive political regime. Her memoir depicts her aspirations of detaching herself from a collective, state-reinforced identity as a worker. Far from asserting class solidarity with her co-workers, Zhang's memoirs narrate her personal progress and individual achievements. Unlike earlier Chinese texts, which portray and were written for the working class as a collective "we," Zhang's subjective writings venture into political and sexual explorations of the individual "I." In addition, her accounts of the "I" are more or less aimed at a Western, English-language market familiar with portrayals of authenticity.

It is interesting to note, however, that after having completed her "class transformation" from a worker to a full-time journalist and author, Zhang now prefers to identify herself as a writer from the working class who sympathizes with socioeconomically underprivileged people in contemporary China. In an email I received from her in early 2021, she remarks that in response to my questions, she reflected for the first time in her life on whether she is a working-class writer or not. With her permission, I quote her original words here: "Now thinking about it, I guess I am a 'working-class writer.' And this experience certainly has lasting impact on me. As both a writer and journalist, I pay great attention to the 小人物 ["little people" or "nobodies"] who struggle in the bottom of the society" (Email interview). Thus, it seems that she did not have a class consciousness when she wrote her books. Her new identification as a working-class writer connects with her concern for those "who struggle in the bottom of the society." She further explained to me that "I am afraid that the status of worker has gone down significantly since the reforms and opening up. Still, I am proud of being a worker once, that experience certainly has

made me more resilient and given me the 'lived experience'" (Email interview). This observation also relates to a series of recent publications by her criticizing working conditions in present-day China. From her retrospective perspective, she is "proud of being a worker once" because this provides her with a "lived experience" that grounds her writings.

Compared to the more conventional Hu's accounts of himself, Zhang's *"Socialism Is Great!"* provides us with a very different illustration of life as a worker at a state-owned factory. Her memoir avoids many of Hu's themes: pride in being a factory worker, dreams of a socialist future, and writing in the socialist realist fashion do not appear. Instead, Zhang's resistance occurs on a personal and "authentic" level. She separates herself from the collective, has intense anti-state sentiments, favors individual freedom, and reinvents herself in an individualist fashion. Read as a working-class memoir, *"Socialism Is Great!"* shows someone fighting against a state-defined and role-based worker identity. To a significant extent, Zhang disrupts the conventional picture of working-class writers who advocate working-class solidarity and write as a means of class struggle. She questions and denounces the socialist beliefs that Hu embraces. In contrast to Hu, Zhang claims her selfhood and agency by revealing the bleakness and ignorance of the working-class people around her. She criticizes the state-owned factory as a "Communist cage" (*"Socialism Is Great!"* 361). To resist a state-imposed working-class identity and shape a different selfhood, she employs a foreign language (English) and an individualist literary form (the memoir).

Zhang was born in 1964 to a working-class family in Nanjing, China. She had to drop out of school at the age of sixteen due to family poverty and, importantly, was forced by her mother to take over her position in a state-owned factory to secure this stable job. Having to leave school and become a worker was replete with disappointments and frustrations for her. She states: "My life was about to take an unwelcome turn" (*"Socialism Is Great!"* 12). She recounts dreadful experiences in a military factory and how she struggled for education opportunities. During the years in the factory, she taught herself English. In 1990, she left China and went to the UK with her then-boyfriend. After three years they returned to China, and Zhang became a journalist, writing in English for Western newspapers and journals. For Zhang, writing and publishing in English was a significant, self-conscious decision, as she explains in her essay "Writing in English in China: An Autobiographical Essay":

> I chose to write in English because, first of all, it frees me politically. I wouldn't be able to publish articles and books with politically

> sensitive content in mainland China. . . . Using my English as a tool also allows me to play up my advantage in some ways. Writing for an *international market* is a very different ball game from writing for a domestic market. There's always a great deal of presumed knowledge if your target is domestic readers. Having written for international media for years, I feel I know when and how to explain certain terminology. (279-80; emphasis added)

Zhang's frank explanations are very telling in terms of uncovering a specific predicament and paradox of the working-class writer. Using English as a "tool" for her struggles shows that as a writer she has to confront authoritarian political censorship by the Chinese government and adopt a foreign language to "free" herself. Yet, the "freedom" of writing in English reverts into serving the demands of "an international market." It is apparent that she appreciates the significance of the market value of her book before writing it. This reflects her historical context, which follows the transition from Mao-era communist China to the economic and social liberalization under Deng Xiaoping. I suggest that the adoption of the English language in her writing fulfills the vital role of resisting political domination, and yet, somewhat paradoxically, it also subjects her to specifiable market demands (in Moeller and D'Ambrosio's terminology, the demands of "profilicity").

It took almost two decades for Zhang to acquire the English skills needed to realize her wish to publish in this language. Learning English was a choice made out of individual aspiration and for personal growth, but it also served as an escape route from the communist environment she grew up in, as she explains:

> I began to teach myself English at 21 when I was still a rocket factory girl in my hometown Nanjing, on the banks of the Yangtze River. I had grown up in a residential compound that belonged to the military factory my mother worked for. All my neighbors were factory workers, and all my friends were the children of workers. But I had a grand plan for myself: excelling academically at school, I had hoped to go to university and become a writer and a journalist. (Actually, I didn't quite understand the difference between a writer and a journalist as I do now.) ("Writing" 278)

This paragraph outlines Zhang's view of her relation to the working-class collective she belonged to. After pointing out that her mother, neighbors, and friends were all

factory workers, she highlights her "grand plan" of "excelling" in such an environment by going to a university and becoming a writer and journalist. Her memoir consists of extensive descriptions of the obstacles she encountered while learning English, primarily when she worked in the factory.

In a chapter titled "A Tool of Struggle," Zhang explains that she learned from her teacher that Marx said, "'Foreign language is a tool of class struggle," and that she then determined that "foreign language was going to be my tool of struggle, too" (*"Socialism Is Great!"* 185). Unlike the conventional Marxist working-class struggle against capitalism or harsh working conditions, her struggle unfolds in a neoliberal manner. That is to say, it is mainly framed by portraying a resistance against, first, the cynical, violent, and unsupportive working-class individuals around her, including family members and co-workers; and second, the authoritarian communist regime represented in her portrait of the oppressive factory. Her struggle within these two dimensions crucially established her individualist spirit and self-identity. Indeed, Zhang's representation of working-class life is quite intriguing. Workers are usually presented in a negative light, very different from how Hu describes his co-workers as industrious, uplifting, "socialist men." While Hu's earlier writings and "mode of production" were deeply influenced by communist ideology, Zhang exhibits a mode of working-class writing peppered with neoliberalist ideas. The worker's life she describes takes place in a state-owned factory in the 1980s. It corresponds to Hu's stories from the same period, which show a disillusioned working class who had lost faith in socialism and who tended to be more Westernized and individualist. As a proletarian writer, however, Hu was still committed to realizing a socialist China and conveyed his beliefs through a range of working-class characters. Zhang, in contrast, bluntly challenges and contradicts this arc characteristic of Hu's representations of working-class life.

Like Hu, Zhang highlights conflicts between the older generation of workers from the 1950s and the younger generation in the 1980s. She does so by writing extensively about her own disputes with her mother, who had been a worker since the 1950s. She shows little sympathy for the older working-class generation and resents becoming a worker, in contrast to her mother: "Ma had given up the most important and cherished thing in her life, a job that provided self-esteem and identity along with income" (*"Socialism Is Great!"* 45). Her mother, like many workers in the 1950s, felt a deep-rooted working-class identity and a proud belonging. When her mother left the factory job, she underwent a severe identity crisis and felt frustrated. Zhang recollects a fight between the two of them when her mother screamed: "Don't you see what a great sacrifice I made for you? *Without this job, I*

am nothing, nobody!" This no longer makes sense to Zhang, and she replies, "Who cares about your precious rice bowl? If you can, please return to your great job, as I would love to return to school" (42; emphasis added). Apart from the generational fissure in relation to the factory job, Zhang lists other clashes with her mother.

Zhang's family was roiled by violence, perpetrating a further disparity in her life. Facing aggression and violence was an incessant struggle for her. In her depictions of bitter confrontations within her family, she delineates a rather ruthless working-class background against which her struggle to receive an education takes place. She constantly employs memories of her family members to deepen her resolution to move to a different class position. These memories keep reminding the reader of the hostility of her past and her desire for disassociation. Her past is the source of her need for self-realization and self-transformation. By representing her working-class upbringing in this manner, Zhang signals that such a background cannot define her as a person. Instead, it makes her envision a different future. She declares: "Now, my unfulfilling life at the factory had triggered my rebellious side. I almost enjoyed annoying her [her mother]" (*"Socialism Is Great!"* 95). Her "rebellious side" shows itself in the process of seeking education opportunities. Before taking up her English education, she enrolls in an "open university" to study mechanical engineering and works hard to pass the entrance exam. It is not so much that she is interested in the field itself. Instead, it offers a precious opportunity to exit factory life. As she explains, her enrollment was "the only way to obtain some near-decent education, and the only way to escape" (100). Later, she joins her friend, Zhou Fang, in obtaining a part-time degree in English at another open university, taking courses on American and British history and intensive reading. Zhang describes her enjoyment of these opportunities and juxtaposes her exhilaration with the bitter reactions and insulting remarks of her co-workers.

The portrait of her co-workers as a working-class collective is in line with the representation of her family. Here, too, she struggles and resists by receiving an education. More importantly, her process of self-discovery and self-realization is a way of resisting a collective identity. For Zhang, most of her co-workers seem shallow and even venomous. They appear to be only interested in gossiping or "blowing bull" (吹牛 *chuiniu*, bragging), and they are either stupid or brainwashed by the CCP. This detailed reconstruction of her co-workers invites us to realize a different aspect of working-class life under the communist regime. Compared to Hu's fictional characters, her workers provide a more personal and direct look at the shattering working-class identity crisis that accompanied the social transformation within that class.

In Zhang's memoir, the daily life of the workers is saturated by alienation, which is followed by boredom and violence. Her impressions of her superior, Master Cheng, for instance, consist in his coarse language and the violent abuse of his co-worker. She writes, "[l]imited by poor education and mediocrity, Cheng never got the promotions he coveted. But he carried on reporting, driven by a self-imposed responsibility to inform the leadership about the actions of the people—especially those he disliked" (53). Here, she downplays the idea of the working class as a united and uplifting collective by depicting her co-workers through an individual lens. She critiques the educational level of factory workers and their "mediocrity" as she attempts to differentiate herself from them. In addition, in her version of working-class life, solidarity among workers is replaced by constant tension and conflicts. Because of her endeavors to get educated and gain a sense of individuality, she receives a great deal of scorn and is dismissed by her co-workers. Yet, this rejection makes Zhang only more determined to escape from people like them. In the chapter "A Tool of Struggle," she presents an unpleasant episode while she was learning English: "Amid the rumor and gossip that followed, the general consensus labeled me 'a toad that dreams of swan meat.' Once, after catching me speaking English to myself, a couple of workers hissed 'Fake foreign devil!'[, which is] an insulting term for any Chinese person trying to behave like a foreigner." She states that this insult was a crucial point where she turned such attacks around to foster resistance:

> Let people laugh. Frog or toad, I told myself that I had a vision, though not necessarily swan's meat, in mind. All my life, I had been *tinghua* [聽話, to be submissive and obedient], listening to my parents, teachers, bosses, and the Party, following the prescribed path. Now, for the first time, I discovered that it was great fun to be a rebel. No wonder Chairman Mao famously said, "To rebel is justified." (195)

Here, we see a critical moment in Zhang's journey toward being a "rebel" against different communities and their social expectations. Importantly, by writing about this moment from her past, she marks a sharp hallmark of self-realization that arises precisely through breaking from it.

Learning English serves as a symbol of Zhang's ideological and political enlightenment. While reading the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë in English, she could not stop herself from identifying with the protagonist. She says, "Tears came to my eyes: I felt for her; I saw myself in her; momentarily I felt I was the poor girl about to lose her love" (*"Socialism Is Great!"* 193). It was more than her self-

identification with a "poor girl" that struck Zhang as significant about the novel. As she declares later, she gained from it a critical view of "conformity," which, "often in the form of 'collective spirit,' was cultivated from birth" in communist China (196). Hence, her ideology was inspired by Brontë:

> If Jane Eyre had been so obedient to social convention, she could be forever confined to her role as a little governess. I couldn't say exactly when I had deserted my Soviet hero, the selfless Communist Pavel Korchaguin, for an "individualist" like Jane Eyre. Maybe Wang was right: something from those "rotten Western books" had gotten into my head. Foreign language was probably more than just a tool. (196)

First, we note that by reading the novel *Jane Eyre* in English, Zhang strengthened her disobedience and non-conformity. It provided a channel for resisting collectiveness. Also, she highlights that "foreign language" played a significant role in terms of her ideological transformation. The shift from a "selfless" communist hero to an "individualist" "poor girl like me" exhibits her self-recognition and self-interest. Individualism is praised as opposing communist collectiveness. Aside from *Jane Eyre*, Zhang also refers to one of her favorite Chinese poems, "The Answer" by well-known poet Bei Dao (北島, 1949-), which she was introduced to by her friend Lao Pan. As Lao Pan comments, "You can hear Bei Dao's cry for individualism. That's what poetry is always about—the personal and the marginal. Not the mouthpiece of politics" (*"Socialism Is Great!"* 182). This point of view is in line with Zhang's own literary practices, which tell the "I" story from a marginal position.

Along with representing her individualist struggle against her working-class family and co-workers, Zhang sheds light on her resistance against the authoritarian political regime through her portrait of the oppressive factory where she works. She portrays the factory as a "communist cage" with a dreadful look: "I didn't expect the immense scale of the factory, nor its utter bleakness in winter. Vast, impersonal, and downright ugly in parts, Liming mixed the monumental and the plain messy—coal dumps, slag heaps, and massive buildings black with dirty windows" (22-23). Working in such a factory is being "like a prisoner at my workshop" (65). The ugliness of her world lies in "the rows of block buildings" that "projected little life. Everything was practical and functional" (43). Zhang's memoir reconstructs the personal hardships she experienced in this state-owned factory. By writing "against" the working class both ideologically and literally, she conceives and constructs selfhood as the product of personal achievement and individual freedom. And yet,

re-identifying as a working-class writer in the present helps her shape her image on the current literary market.

Another layer of selfhood in Zhang's memoir comes to the fore in her resistance to the patriarchal society and sexist conventions of China. By narrating her past personal romances and sexual experiences, she undergoes a startling voyage of self-discovery. Her resistance takes on the shape of a sexual awakening that is used as a tool of subversion and a means to challenge patriarchy. Yet, such subversion is based on the adoption of Western conceptions of the individualist, neoliberalist modern woman. In Zhang's case, her resistance against patriarchal domination (both in the political and traditional sense) is located in her body and sexuality. Through writing, she constructs her womanhood and asserts her agency. At the same time, her agency is full of conflicts. From the very beginning of the memoir, apart from recounting her struggles as a factory worker and English student, she reports in great detail about her private life and her romantic encounters with various men. For her, the personal sphere serves as an avenue to resist an oppressive regime. She repeatedly claims in various ways that "[i]n our highly politicized society, nothing was personal" and that "[p]rivacy was a luxury no Chinese expected" (106, 337). Particularly her love stories take her body and sexuality as the locus of femininity and assert her self-transformation toward feminine subjectivity and womanhood. Somewhat paradoxically, her moments of claiming subjectivity and womanhood only take place in sexual encounters with men. In this way, one could argue that the formation of her subjectivity was mainly linked to how sexuality and the body were conceived under the neoliberal umbrella of personal freedom and sexual liberation. Such a formation eventually conflicts with itself, leading to both an emotional and physical crisis as a woman.

Moeller and D'Ambrosio stress that

> not everyone is content with authenticity—with its jargon that alternatively, but also sometimes simultaneously, emphasizes the contradictory demands to discover or create an original self, with its stereotypical image that implies that genuine human identity lies, or ought to lie, behind the "masks" taken on in society, and with the ideology of individualism that accompanies it and values personal autonomy over collective bonds. (163-64)

Zhang's *"Socialism Is Great!": A Worker's Memoir of the New China*, however, presents a distinct picture of female resistance in contemporary China that is directed

against a "sincere" working-class identity, looking for contentment instead in the authentic identity of a worker-writer dissociating from her class. Zhang employs two main strategies to overcome her sincerity and find her authentic identity: first, the English language is used to resist a collective working-class identity and as a tool for individual and personal growth; and second, she writes about her body and sexuality to fight patriarchal domination. However, neither strategy is free from ambivalence and paradoxes.

Concluding Remarks

From "literature of the proletariat" to "literature of the real working class," identity has always been a complex and important question when discussing Chinese working-class literature. This paper has analyzed the representations of working-class experience and identity by Wanchun Hu and Lijia Zhang through the lens of Moeller and D'Ambrosio's concept of "identity technologies," with a particular emphasis on their differentiation between "sincerity" and "authenticity." Through the analysis and interpretation of different literary texts, I have sought to shed light on the significant challenges that are intricately associated with the production of working-class literature while also contemplating the idea of identity (in the context of working-class identity) as a larger literary and cultural phenomenon. I hope to have illustrated a historical transition toward an alternative form of Chinese working-class artistic expression that was influenced by Western neoliberal ideologies, centered on individualism, and diverged from the previous state-dominated artistic production underpinned by Soviet theories that prioritized the collective working class. Hu's class identity and writing were greatly influenced by the regime of sincerity, and his committed role as a socialist worker-writer determined his representation of the working class. Eventually, the regime of sincerity collapsed, bringing about a political disillusionment that compelled him to undergo a transformative process affecting both his identity and writing. Under the conditions of authenticity, Zhang's English writing deliberately reflects her disassociation from her native cultural and material setting and her engagement with an international readership. This sharply contrasts with Hu, who primarily contributed to a national cultural project for most of his career. Within Zhang's literary work, ideas of individualism and sexual liberation are posited as counterpoints to the collective institutions and shared interests that underscore working-class identities. However, her recent self-identification as a working-class writer prompts us to re-evaluate how

the working class might be defined and how it might understand itself in an era of neoliberalism.

Works Cited

Clark, Katerina. "Working-Class Literature and/or Proletarian Literature: Polemics of the Russian and Soviet Literary Left." Lennon and Nilsson, pp. 1-30.

Denton, Kirk A. "Historical Overview." Mostow et al., pp. 287-306.

Gotz, Michael Louis. *Images of the Worker in Contemporary Chinese Fiction (1949-1964)*. 1977. U of California, Berkeley, PhD dissertation. *ProQuest*, www.proquest.com/openview/ddb6f7cefab2c0132cf086756082197d/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y.

Hockx, Michel. "Literary Communities and the Production of Literature." Mostow et al., pp. 315-23.

Holock, Donald, and Shu-ying Tsau Holock. "'Not Marxism in Words': Chinese Proletarian Fiction and Socialist Realism." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1992, pp. 1-28. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40874116.

Hu Wanchun 胡萬春. *Gurou* 骨肉 (*Flesh and Bones*). Zuojia chubanshe Shanghai bianjisuo, 1965.

—. *Nüzei* 女賊 (*The Female Thief*). Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 1988.

—. *Shui shi qiji de chuangzaozhe* 誰是奇蹟的創造者 (*Who Is the Maker of the Miracle*). Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1959.

—. *Wo zenyang xuexi chuangzuo* 我怎樣學習創作 (*How Did I Learn to Write*). Henan renmin chubanshe, 1983.

Hyttinen, Elsi, and Kati Launis. "Writing of a Different Class? The First 120 Years of Working-Class Fiction in Finland." Lennon and Nilsson, pp. 65-94.

King, Richard. *Milestones on a Golden Road: Writing for Chinese Socialism, 1945-80*. Hong Kong UP, 2014.

Lennon, John, and Magnus Nilsson, editors. *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives*. Stockholm UP, 2017.

Li, Yunlei. "The Rise of 'Subaltern Literature' in the Twenty-First Century: A Speech at the Utopia Forum (2007)." *Debating the Socialist Legacy and Capitalist Globalization in China*, edited by Xueping Zhong and Ban Wang, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 165-82.

Mao, Zedong. "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art." *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, translated by Bonnie S.

McDougall, U of Michigan P, 1980, pp. 55-86. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.19066.

Moeller, Hans-Georg, and Paul J. D'Ambrosio. *You and Your Profile: Identity after Authenticity*. Columbia UP, 2021.

Mostow, Joshua S., et al., editors. *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*. Columbia UP, 2003.

Nilsson, Magnus, and John Lennon. "Defining Working-Class Literature(s): A Comparative Approach between U.S. Working-Class Studies and Swedish Literary History." *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2, Apr. 2016, pp. 39-61.

Ragvald, Lars. "The Emergence of 'Worker-Writers' in Shanghai." *Shanghai: Revolution and Development in an Asian Metropolis*, edited by Christopher Howe, Cambridge UP, 1981, pp. 301-25.

Zhang, Lijia. Email interview with the author, 28 Jan. 2021.

—. *"Socialism Is Great!" A Worker's Memoir of the New China*. Atlas & Co, 2008.

—. "Writing in English in China: An Autobiographical Essay." *World Englishes*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2015, pp. 278-81. *Wiley Online Library*, www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/weng.12138.

About the Author

Luka Lei Zhang recently received her PhD in English from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. In her PhD thesis, she examines working-class literature from Asia and its modes of production. She is a translator of working-class poetry.

[Received 15 February 2023; accepted 10 April 2023]