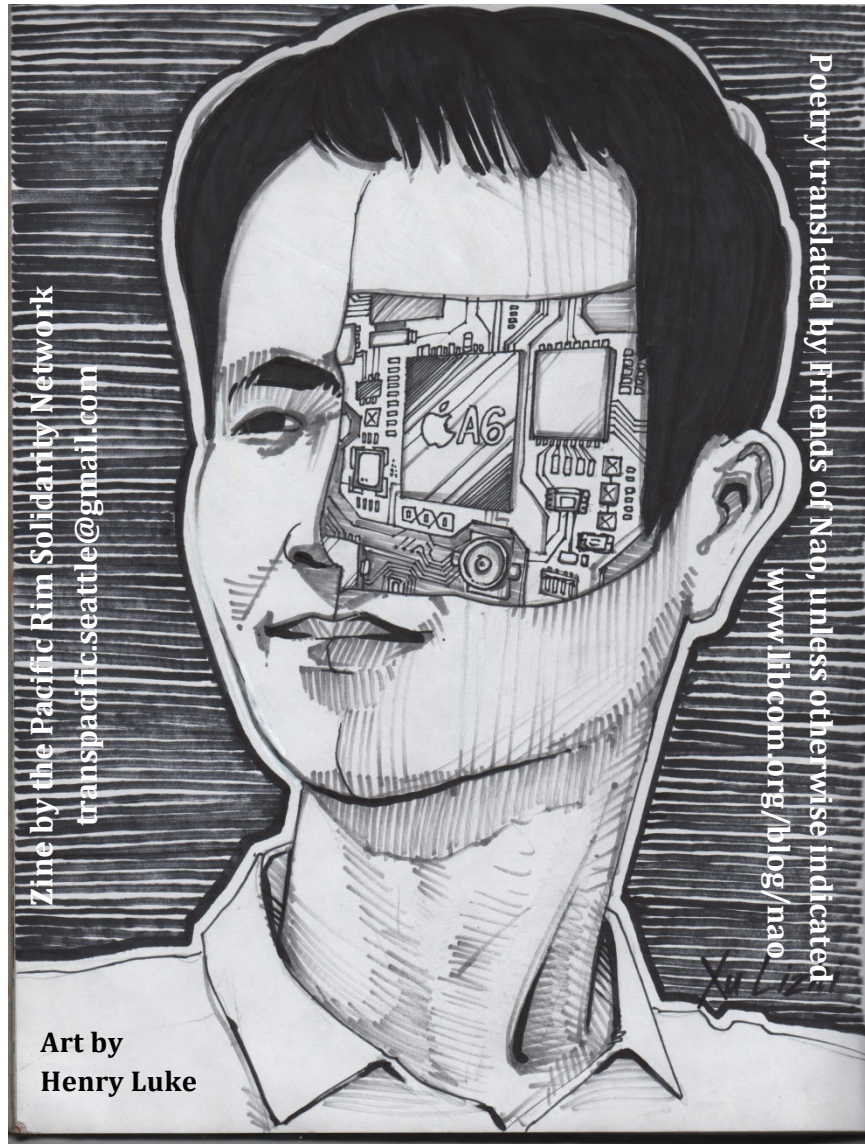


GHOST IN THE MACHINE:

The Poetry and Brief Life of Foxconn Worker Xu Lizhi



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INTRODUCTION: MORE THAN SCREWS AND SCREWED UP PEOPLE

On 30th Sept 2014, one day before China's National Day, Xu Lizhi, a worker in Foxconn's Shenzhen Longhua factory took his own life. In doing so, he joined 18 Foxconn workers who took their own lives in 2010-2011, in a drastic refusal of factory life and their fates as migrant workers, as well as the many silenced Foxconn workers who have done the same since. In light of these damning actions, Terry Gou, CEO of Taiwan-based Hon Hai Precision Industries, which owns the Foxconn factories, conducted a series of public relations maneuvers, including offers of humanitarian payouts to families of dead workers coupled with some dramatic kow tows to the public.

No number of kow tows or corporate apologies to deceased Foxconn workers will erase the fact that these lives were lost. Guilt and crocodile tears do not bring them back. Tragedies of this sort will continue to happen until society ceases to be arranged in a way that pushes people to such ends.

It is a raw fact: workers' lives are made disposable by Foxconn and the larger capitalist system it is a part of. Human life is quantified and reduced to work hours and production quotas. The only thing that matters is one's capacity to produce for the sake of profit. Human worth, time, and energy is congealed and encapsulated into new Apple products sold on the market. As these commodities forge divergent paths around the world, they wrench out traces of workers' life energy, separated and alienated from their bodies like an idol made sacred behind the veil of a temple. As Xu puts it, "Even the machine is nodding off / Sealed workshops store diseased iron / Wages concealed behind curtains."

So when a fellow worker jumps off a building, Xu calls them a screw that fell to the ground. A breathing warm body with inspirations, sorrows, complexity, and potential for human emotions - and a screw. It's a stark comparison, but it illustrates the glaring eye of capitalist surveillance and discipline, and its effects on human bodies. Waged, disciplined, productive labor in the capitalist economy, so fetishized in our capitalist world, is the marker that makes one deserving of all other great things in life, and when one is unable or unwilling to produce on command, one is discarded as useless. This stark reality shows its true colors in Xu's poems -- capitalism rips life away

from us -- diminishes who we are, captures our tears before they can fall. It freezes us.

We are deserving of life, of joy, of fullness, of healing, of food, of sensuality and emotion, regardless of our earning capacity, regardless of our ability to work, or lack thereof. We are capable of being sick, of healing, of adapting, regardless of our productive capacity. Capital does not respect these natural rhythms of our bodies, so they register only as leaks in the social machine, static in the cybernetic network: crazy, dysfunctional, disabled workers; broken screws falling to the floor.

This is the daily violence masked by capitalist social relations. To resist it is to pose the question: how can we relate to each other in ways that cultivate these bodily capacities, refusing to treat each other as disposable? Marx described communism as the creation of a new set of senses, a new sensorium, which we can use to communicate with each other and with the planet. Xu's poems show glimpses of these senses emerging and then being brutally ground down:

仿似年轻打工者深埋于心底的爱情

Like the love that young workers bury at the bottom of their hearts

没有时间开口，情感徒留灰尘

With no time for expression, emotion crumbles into dust

他们有着铁打的胃

They have stomachs forged of iron

盛满浓稠的硫酸，硝酸

Full of thick acid, sulfuric and nitric

工业向他们收缴来不及流出的泪

Industry captures their tears before they have the chance to fall

时辰走过，他们清醒全无

Time flows by, their heads lost in fog

产量压低了年龄，疼痛在日夜加班

Output weighs down their age, pain works overtime day and night

还未老去的头晕潜伏生命

In their lives, dizziness before their time is latent

Xu's dehumanizing experiences at work force us to confront our own experiences as well. Do we too, lose our human capacities? How does the discipline of work cause us to subvert ourselves and take on the function of an object, of a "screw"? How does it isolate us from the other people who share similar conditions? How are communities fractured by gruelling schedules, endless overtime shifts, or the ways we turn our resentment against work into resentment against ourselves and each other?

Some may be tempted to distance themselves from these tragedies, to view Xu's experiences as exceptions to an otherwise benign capitalist system. For them, Xu is just a particularly unfortunate worker, a guy who was depressed, someone who deserves our sympathy, but not someone whose words and life illuminate our reality. In a public statement, the Foxconn corporation said, "No matter how hard we try, nobody can eliminate this kind of tragic incidents."¹ This is a phony sympathy trapped within the confines of the emotional vocabulary that capitalism allows us to feel. It cuts short the new sensorium that Xu desired in his poems and could not realize in his life within the factory and dorms. It cuts short the desire and the strength that all of us might have to actually eliminate these tragedies. Perhaps depression and suicide will continue to be a part of the human experience even after the end of capitalism. But the reduction of our bodies into discarded screw is not an unavoidable timeless tragedy. It is violence. Deliberate violence perpetrated directly against Xu and millions of others by the capitalist system, its machines, and their owners.

Xu's death is not separate, distant, or exotic. Racists might claim it is a result of a Chinese culture which they think devalues the dignity of the human person. Not only are they ignorant about life in China, but they are also in denial about the realities of life here in the US. In fact, Xu's poems should resonate deeply inside the US empire, where suicide rates climb through the

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/11/12/the-haunting-poetry-of-a-chinese-factory-worker-who-committed-suicide/>

roof, where people blow out their brains in lonely rooms to finally get some rest from the endless stress of the daily grind.

Prisons & the social factory of US society

Here in the imperial metropolis, many lives have also been made disposable, our senses are also numbed by the suffocating, bland white walls of the social factory, pushing down on our dignity. Even if we are not working in Foxconn factories, we labor in various ways through urban landscapes organized into gigantic networks of nonstop production, distribution, and consumption. This social factory reproduces and feeds off of our desires, it regenerates our sense of insecurity, leaving us no choice but to plunge into paid and unpaid work as often as possible. We are kept anxious 24/7, clocking in and out of our jobs, looking for new jobs, caring for children and elders with limited resources and support, trying to get a degree or certification so we can have a little more security, and generally losing sleep. Unaffordable apartments, homeless shelters, and schools that feel like prisons and prisons that are cages... these are the Foxconn dorms of America -- fluorescent, incessant, noisy, occupied places where we feel alone in the crowd.

The most extreme version of this capitalist reality exists in America's prisons, which are condensed microcosms of society, experiments in social control. Slave labor and solitary confinement strip human beings of social connection and warmth, the foundation of our being as a mammalian species. Through this violence, potentially rebellious unemployed people are remolded and forced to become workers again, slaving onward in fast food restaurants and newly "insourced" low wage factories, surveilled constantly by probation officers and the courts, told they will be reincarcerated if they don't accept shitty working conditions. This and the Foxconn factories are two dimensions of the same global capitalist system.

Xu's is a workers death -- this is clear and easy to understand because he worked in a factory that produces the iPhones we consume. When poor people kill themselves here in the US, the media does not describe their deaths as "worker suicides" even though their bodies are also dropping to the floor of the global social factory. This social factory that rips out our desires and manipulates our needs, is also responsible for the conditions that lead to suicide here. Xu's exact motivations for suicide one can never know, but the context leading to them that breeds alienation, frustration, isolation -- these aren't too far away from us either.

We don't call it work-related only because work is invisibilized in the contemporary US. This is the land where most people suffer from work and/or unemployment, but TV and social media tell us this is temporary, that we are on our way to becoming rich. We are told we are better than those poor Chinese workers, better than those migrant farmworkers. Better than the world. This thinly veiled sense of imperial superiority leaves us blaming ourselves when we don't make it into the so-called "middle class". When we suffer, we view it as a personal failure, not a product of the capitalist system. For that reason, many of us sink into depression and suicide.

Some "middle class" activists here might ignore all of this context, thinking that Americans' relative privilege means we are not suffering and that we should focus on helping poor workers like Xu rather than rebelling in solidarity with them. This is the basis for anti-sweatshop organizing on many college campuses. The message is one of moral shame: don't buy iPhones or other products made in such oppressive factories; wipe your hands of Xu's blood. While it's good that people are organizing and raising awareness, this approach is extremely limited. It views workers like Xu only as victims, not as writers, lovers, intellectuals, and possibly future rebels and accomplices.

This approach also presents people here only as consumers, not as workers along the supply chain of the global factory run by Apple, Foxconn, and similar companies. It fails to recognize how for some workers here, our iPhones are the very medium by which capitalism keeps us working 24/7, scanning credit cards in a store, or responding to emails from our bosses late at night while we're trying to get some much needed rest.

We all have reason to want to destroy this system that is destroying us. Instead of simply boycotting iPhones, what if we organized ourselves as port workers, warehouse workers, retail workers in Apple stores, and workers who use Apple products on our jobs? When Foxconn workers in China go on strike, what if we try to generalize these strikes all along the supply chain, shutting down the production, distribution, and retail of Apple products?

This might seem far-fetched. But it becomes more imaginable when we remember that Foxconn workers in China are not simply committing suicide, they are also rebelling. In 2012 there were riots at another Foxconn factory. The Chinese working class in general has been engaging in militant strikes, occupations, riots, kidnapping of bosses, and direct confrontation with police

who protect corporate property. Keep this in mind when you hear American trade unionists claim that Chinese workers are stealing their jobs because they are too docile and willing to accept low wages. In fact, they are much more militant than American unions have been in recent years, and for that reason they are forcing the capitalists to grant higher wages. In fact, that's why some companies are starting to move production back to the U.S.

When Mohammed Bouazizi lit himself on fire in Tunisia, this sparked the Arab Spring revolts. So far the Foxconn suicides have not sparked a similar response in China, but they are definitely part of a simmering discontent that the Chinese and American ruling classes seem to fear. Perhaps that's why translations of Xu's poems were taken up by the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post. His words are a spectre haunting the global economy.

"Revolutionary suicide"

Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party in the US, argued that Black people in America face the choice between reactionary suicide and revolutionary suicide. Reactionary suicide means suicide from a constrained life in the ghetto, fueled by the self-resentment that comes with not fighting back against one's oppressor. Revolutionary suicide means really living: being willing to risk one's life to get free, together with one's community. As Newton puts it,

"Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible. When reactionary forces crush us, we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death. We will have to be driven out with a stick."

This summer in Ferguson, Black youth rose up in response to the police murder of Mike Brown. Heavily militarized cops pointed rifles at them. With the laser sights on their chests, some of these youth made it clear they were not afraid to live, even if that means dying fighting. After all, their only other choice is to risk being killed at some later point by a cop or vigilante. This happens every 28 hours in the United States. The courage of these youth has sparked a continent-wide and international movement against the police.

The situation these youth are facing, and the situation Xu faces, are of course very different. The Ferguson rebels face rapid murder, their very skin color marking them as targets; Xu and his fellow workers face anonymous, slow death through alienation, chemical poisoning, isolation, and depression. However, the Ferguson rebels' fearlessness and Xu's poetic meditations both illuminate the meaning of life and death in late capitalism. Both express the limit experiences of a human species trying desperately not to destroy ourselves as capitalism strains under what might become its own fatal contradictions.

What if all of us who are made disposable under this global capitalist system decide to dispose of the system itself? What if we affirm our lives by risking them in a common struggle against the forces of death so powerfully communicated in Xu's poems?

Jomo & Mamos
Dec 2nd 2014
Seattle, USA

《我弥留之际》
“*On My Deathbed*”

我想再看一眼大海，目睹我半生的泪水有多汪洋
我想再爬一爬高高的山头，试着把丢失的灵魂喊回来
我还想摸一摸天空，碰一碰那抹轻轻的蓝
可是这些我都办不到了，我就要离开这个世界了
所有听说过我的人们啊
不必为我的离开感到惊讶
更不必叹息，或者悲伤
我来时很好，去时，也很好

I want to take another look at the ocean, behold the vastness of tears from half
a lifetime
I want to climb another mountain, try to call back the soul that I've lost
I want to touch the sky, feel that blueness so light
But I can't do any of this, so I'm leaving this world
Everyone who's heard of me
Shouldn't be surprised at my leaving
Even less should you sigh or grieve
I was fine when I came, and fine when I left.

30 September 2014

《河·岸》
"River • Shore"

Translated by Lucas Klein, published by China Labor Bulletin

我站在路边看着马路上
流来流去的行人和车辆
我站在树下，在公交站牌下
看着流来流去的水
流来流去的血液和欲望
我站在路边看着流来流去的他们
他们在路上看着流来流去的我
他们在河里，我在岸上
他们光着膀子使劲地游
这情景感染了我
我犹豫着要不要也到河里去
跟他们一起使劲，一起咬牙切齿
我犹豫着，直到日落西山

I stand by the road watching the road
a flow of pedestrians and vehicles coming and going
I stand under a tree, under a bus stop sign
watching the flow of water coming and going
the flow of blood and desire coming and going
I stand by the road watching the flow of them coming and going
on the road they watch the flow of me coming and going
they are in a river, I am on the shore
they are bare and struggling to swim as fast as they can
the sight infects me
I try to decide if I should go into the river too
to struggle with them, to clench my teeth
I try to decide, as the sun sinks beneath the hills

6 October 2013

《出租屋》
"Rented Room"

十平米左右的空间
局促，潮湿，终年不见天日
我在这里吃饭，睡觉，拉屎，思考
咳嗽，偏头痛，生老，病不死
昏黄的灯光下我一再发呆，傻笑
来回踱步，低声唱歌，阅读，写诗
每当我打开窗户或者柴门
我都像一位死者
把棺材盖，缓缓推开

A space of ten square meters
Cramped and damp, no sunlight all year
Here I eat, sleep, shit, and think
Cough, get headaches, grow old, get sick but still fail to die
Under the dull yellow light again I stare blankly, laughing like an idiot
I pace back and forth, singing softly, reading, writing poems
Every time I open the window or the wicker gate
I seem like a dead man
Slowly pushing open the lid of a coffin.

2 December 2013

《我就那样站着入睡》
"I Fall Asleep, Just Standing Like That"

眼前的纸张微微发黄
我用钢笔在上面凿下深浅不一的黑
里面盛满打工的词汇
车间，流水线，机台，上岗证，加班，薪水……
我被它们治得服服贴贴
我不会呐喊，不会反抗
不会控诉，不会埋怨
只默默地承受着疲惫
驻足时光之初
我只盼望每月十号那张灰色的薪资单
赐我以迟到的安慰
为此我必须磨去棱角，磨去语言
拒绝旷工，拒绝病假，拒绝事假
拒绝迟到，拒绝早退
流水线旁我站立如铁，双手如飞
多少白天，多少黑夜
我就那样，站着入睡

The paper before my eyes fades yellow
With a steel pen I chisel on it uneven black
Full of working words
Workshop, assembly line, machine, work card, overtime, wages...
They've trained me to become docile
Don't know how to shout or rebel
How to complain or denounce
Only how to silently suffer exhaustion
When I first set foot in this place
I hoped only for that grey pay slip on the tenth of each month
To grant me some belated solace
For this I had to grind away my corners, grind away my words
Refuse to skip work, refuse sick leave, refuse leave for private reasons
Refuse to be late, refuse to leave early
By the assembly line I stood straight like iron, hands like flight,
How many days, how many nights
Did I - just like that - standing fall asleep?

20 August 2011

《一颗螺丝掉在地上》
"A Screw Fell to the Ground"

一颗螺丝掉在地上
在这个加班的夜晚
垂直降落，轻轻一响
不会引起任何人的注意
就像在此之前
某个相同的夜晚
有个人掉在地上

A screw fell to the ground
In this dark night of overtime
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
It won't attract anyone's attention
Just like last time
On a night like this
When someone plunged to the ground

9 January 2014

《粉红》
“Pink”

Translated by Lucas Klein, published by China Labor Bulletin

我看中一块墓地，在城中村
已经很久很久了
我看中她粉红的墓碑，粉红的草地
粉红的溪水和粉红的云朵
我将带着一生粉红的疾病
躺进粉红的棺材
当棺材盖缓缓合上
我也将直视正午粉红的天空和粉红的太阳
让两行粉红的泪水，悄悄流淌

I see a grave, in a village in the city
for such a long, long time
I see her pink tombstone, in pink grass
a pink stream and pink cumulous clouds
I will contract a pink disease
and lie in a pink coffin
and when the lids closes softly
will stare straight at the pink sun and the pink noon sky
crying two silent, pink streams of tears

21 October 2013

《我谈到血》
“I Speak of Blood”

Translated by Lucas Klein, published by China Labor Bulletin

我谈到血，也是出于无奈
我也想谈谈风花雪月
谈谈前朝的历史，酒中的诗词
可现实让我只能谈到血
血源自火柴盒般的出租屋
这里狭窄，逼仄，终年不见天日
挤压着打工仔打工妹
失足妇女异地丈夫
卖麻辣烫的四川小伙
摆地摊的河南老人
以及白天为生活而奔波
黑夜里睁着眼睛写诗的我
我向你们谈到这些人，谈到我们
一只只在生活的泥沼中挣扎的蚂蚁
一滴滴在打工路上走动的血
被城管追赶或者机台绞碎的血
沿途撒下失眠，疾病，下岗，自杀
一个个爆炸的词汇
在珠三角，在祖国的腹部
被介错刀一样的订单解剖着
我向你们谈到这些
纵然声音喑哑，舌头断裂
也要撕开这时代的沉默
我谈到血，天空破碎
我谈到血，满嘴鲜红

I speak of blood, because I can't help it
I'd love to talk about flowers in the breeze and the moon in the snow
I'd love to talk about imperial history, about poems in wine
But this reality only lets me speak of blood
blood from a rented room the size of a matchbox
narrow, cramped, with no sight of the sun all year
extruding working guys and girls
stray women in long-distance marriages
sichuan chaps selling *mala tang*
old ladies from henan manning stands
and me with eyes open all night to write a poem
after running about all day to make a living
I tell you about these people, about us
ants struggling through the swamp of life
drops of blood on the way to work
blood chased by cops or smashed by the machine
by casting off insomnia, disease, downsizes, suicide
each explosive word
in the pearl river delta, in the pit of the stomach of the country
eviscerated by an order slip slicing like a *kaishaku* blade
I tell you these things
even as I go mute, even as my tongue cracks
to tear open the silence of the age
to speak of blood, of the sky crumbling
I speak of blood, my mouth all crimson

17 September 2013

《最后的墓地》
"The Last Graveyard"

机台的鸣叫也打着瞌睡
密封的车间贮藏疾病的铁
薪资隐藏在窗帘后面
仿似年轻打工者深埋于心底的爱情
没有时间开口，情感徒留灰尘
他们有着铁打的胃
盛满浓稠的硫酸，硝酸
工业向他们收缴来不及流出的泪
时辰走过，他们清醒全无
产量压低了年龄，疼痛在日夜加班
还未老去的头晕潜伏生命
皮肤被治具强迫褪去
顺手镀上一层铝合金
有人还在坚持着，有人含病离去
我在他们中间打盹，留守青春的
最后一块墓地

Even the machine is nodding off
Sealed workshops store diseased iron
Wages concealed behind curtains
Like the love that young workers bury at the bottom of their hearts
With no time for expression, emotion crumbles into dust
They have stomachs forged of iron
Full of thick acid, sulfuric and nitric
Industry captures their tears before they have the chance to fall
Time flows by, their heads lost in fog
Output weighs down their age, pain works overtime day and night
In their lives, dizziness before their time is latent
The jig forces the skin to peel
And while it's at it, plates on a layer of aluminum alloy
Some still endure, while others are taken by illness
I am dozing between them, guarding
The last graveyard of our youth.

21 December 2011

《我咽下一枚铁做的月亮》
"I Swallowed a Moon Made of Iron"

我咽下一枚铁做的月亮
他们把它叫做螺丝
我咽下这工业的废水，失业的订单
那些低于机台的青春早早夭亡
我咽下奔波，咽下流离失所
咽下人行天桥，咽下长满水锈的生活
我再咽不下了
所有我曾经咽下的现在都从喉咙汹涌而出
在祖国的领土上铺成一首
耻辱的诗

I swallowed a moon made of iron
They refer to it as a nail
I swallowed this industrial sewage, these unemployment documents
Youth stooped at machines die before their time
I swallowed the hustle and the destitution
Swallowed pedestrian bridges, life covered in rust
I can't swallow any more
All that I've swallowed is now gushing out of my throat
Unfurling on the land of my ancestors
Into a disgraceful poem.

19 December 2013

《被生活埋葬的心》
“Heart Buried by Life”

Translated by Lucas Klein, published by China Labor Bulletin

还要不要隐忍下去
眼皮早已沉重如山
他的头试着在黑夜里抬起
沾满泪的星光就瓢泼而下
风一起，他单薄的身躯总要抖几抖
少年时光在懊恼中离去
剩下一场雪，纷纷，纷纷
梦里，他品尝到的火苗都是冰冷的
而磨损的皮肤像一床破绵絮
摊开在岁月的风里
固有的信念再找不到方向
连同他那颗被生活埋葬的
比海洋更深的心

continue to bear it?
eyelids heavy as mountains
his head tries lifting in the night
tear-drenched starlight gushes down
with wind, his frail body always about to shake
moments of youth flee in annoyance
leaving behind a snowstorm, a turbulent tumult
in dreams, the flames he tastes are ice cold
and his ground-off skin a bed of cotton bolls
spread out in the winds of time
intrinsic beliefs unable to find direction
like his heart buried deeper than
the depths of the ocean by life

15 December 2011

《我一生中的路还远远没有走完》
"My Life's Journey is Still Far from Complete"

这是谁都没有料到的
我一生中的路
还远远没有走完
就要倒在半路上了
类似的困境
以前也不是没有
只是都不像这次
来得这么突然
这么凶猛
一再地挣扎
竟全是徒劳
我比谁都渴望站起来
可是我的腿不答应
我的胃不答应
我全身的骨头都不答应
我只能这样平躺着
在黑暗里一次次地发出
无声的求救信号
再一次地听到
绝望的回响

This is something no one expected
My life's journey
Is far from over
But now it's stalled at the halfway mark
It's not as if similar difficulties
Didn't exist before
But they didn't come
As suddenly
As ferociously
Repeatedly struggle
But all is futile
I want to stand up more than anyone else
But my legs won't cooperate
My stomach won't cooperate
All the bones of my body won't cooperate
I can only lie flat
In this darkness, sending out
A silent distress signal, again and again
Only to hear, again and again
The echo of desperation.

13 July 2014

《冲突》
"Conflict"

他们都说
我是个话很少的孩子
对此我并不否认
实际上
我说与不说
都会跟这个社会
发生冲突

They all say
I'm a child of few words
This I don't deny
But actually
Whether I speak or not
With this society I'll still
Conflict

7 June 2013

《讖言一种》
"A Kind of Prophecy"

村里的老人都说
我跟我爷爷年轻时很像
刚开始我不以为然
后来经他们一再提起
我就深信不疑了
我跟我爷爷
不仅外貌越看越像
就连脾性和爱好
也像同一个娘胎里出来的
比如我爷爷外号竹竿
我外号衣架
我爷爷经常忍气吞声
我经常唯唯诺诺
我爷爷喜欢猜谜
我喜欢预言
1943 年秋，鬼子进
我爷爷被活活烧死
享年 23 岁
我今年 23 岁

Elders in the village say
I resemble my grandfather in his youth
I didn't recognize it
But listening to them time and again
Won me over
My grandfather and I share
Facial expressions
Temperaments, hobbies
Almost as if we came from the same womb
They nicknamed him "bamboo pole"
And me, "clothes hanger"
He often swallowed his feelings
I'm often obsequious
He liked guessing riddles
I like premonitions
In the autumn of 1943, the Japanese devils invaded
and burned my grandfather alive
at the age of 23.
This year I turn 23.

18 June 2013

《惊闻 90 后青工诗人许立志坠楼有感》
"Upon Hearing the News of Xu Lizhi's Suicide"

by Zhou Qizao (周启早), a fellow worker at Foxconn

每一个生命的消失
都是另一个我的离去
又一枚螺丝松动
又一位打工兄弟坠楼
你替我死去
我替你继续写诗
顺便拧紧螺丝
今天是祖国六十五岁的生日
举国欢庆
二十四岁的你立在灰色的镜框里微微含笑
秋风秋雨
白发苍苍的父亲捧着黑色的骨灰盒趑趄还乡

The loss of every life
Is the passing of another me
Another screw comes loose
Another migrant worker brother jumps
You die in place of me
And I keep writing in place of you
While I do so, tightening the screws
Today is our nation's sixty-fifth birthday
The country is in joyous celebrations
A twenty-four-year-old you stands in the grey picture frame, smiling ever so
slightly
Autumn winds and autumn rain
A white-haired father, holding the black urn with your ashes, stumbles home.

1 October 2014

拒绝被“消化”的死亡

2014年10月1日，24岁的诗人、富士康工人许立志坠楼身亡，警方判断为自杀。媒体报道这一事件时，常常提到许“生前留下[的]最后一首诗”《我弥留之际》，并特别引用诗的结句：“我来时很好，去时，也很好。”

在断章取义的误用和滥用中，“我来时很好，去时，也很好”正在消解掉诗人死亡的重量。许的自杀被“很好”地披上了一层个人解脱的外衣，变身为诗人个人厌倦人生之后的告别仪式。与此相配合，这些媒体报道将许的人生和诗歌写作强分成两个时期：“向上健康”的“追梦”期和“追梦”失败后的“消极”“厌世”期，强调后者终结于他24岁的本命年，完全把许的死亡归结于他个人的性格、际遇甚至宿命。²

这种解读方式首先有事实上的硬伤。只要查阅一下许的博客就可以看到，创作于2014年7月3日的《我弥留之际》并非他生前留下的最后一首诗。³仅就博客上发表的作品而言，便有更晚的7月13-20日创作的三首组诗，其中第一首《我一生中的路还远远没有走完》全诗如下：

这是谁都没有料到的

我一生中的路

还远远没有走完

就要倒在半路上了

类似的困境

以前也不是没有

只是都不像这次

来得这么突然

这么凶猛

²例见《成都商报》报道《90后诗人许立志坠楼身亡》（2014年10月5日，http://e.chengdu.cn/html/2014-10/05/content_491586.htm）及《观察者网》报道《90后打工诗人许立志坠楼身亡疑自杀 留诗<我弥留之际>》

（http://www.guancha.cn/culture/2014_10_05_273397.shtml）。

³许立志博客：<http://blog.sina.com.cn/1360qxh>

一再地挣扎
竟全是徒劳
我比谁都渴望站起来
可是我的腿不答应
我的胃不答应
我全身的骨头都不答应
我只能这样平躺着
在黑暗里一次次地发出
无声的求救信号
再一次次地听到
绝望的回响

在这首媒体有意无意忽略的诗中，是继续还是放弃人生从一开始就不是“我”的选项。“我”全然被动，只能在绝望中看着自己的人生被直击身体的外力不断地压迫、最终强行切断。这外力如此强大，以至于个体所有的挣扎都徒劳无功，一再的求救都被无声地吞噬。这样的死亡毫无解脱可言，而只能是诗中所写的“黑暗”的“困境”的延伸。

身体的苦痛和湮灭是外力的束缚与残害的直接后果，这是贯穿许立志诗作的重要主题。早在 2011 年，即媒体所谓的许的“追梦”期，许已经写下《我就那样站着入睡》，直指这外力的来源：

车间，流水线，机台，上岗证，加班，薪水……
我被它们治得服服贴贴
我不会呐喊，不会反抗
不会控诉，不会埋怨
只默默地承受着疲惫
驻足时光之初

我只盼望每月十号那张灰色的薪资单

赐我以迟到的安慰

为此我必须磨去棱角，磨去语言

拒绝旷工，拒绝病假，拒绝事假

拒绝迟到，拒绝早退

流水线旁我站立如铁，双手如飞

多少白天，多少黑夜

我就那样，站着入睡

如福柯所言，在资本主义生产方式下，只有身体“被某种征服体制所控制时，它才可能形成一种劳动力”。⁴许立志诗中的“车间，流水线，机台，上岗证，加班，薪水”都是这庞大的征服机制的组成部分。驱动这套征服机制的资本所需要的正是物化为生产原料（“铁”）的身体，或者说是“站着入睡”的身体——站立的工作姿势与主体性消失的睡眠状态相结合，身体才能完美地成为“双手如飞”、思考停顿的流水线上的劳动力。

因此，身体被征服为劳动力的过程也就是资本主义生产吞噬劳工主体性的过程。正如许立志在诗中反复吟咏的，这种吞噬是要把劳工的血肉之躯“消化”，让他们与生产线彻底融为一体：

沿着流水线，笔直而下

我看到了自己的青春

汨汨流动，如血般地

主板，弹片，铁盒……一晃过（《流水线上的雕塑》）

流动，流动

物料与我的血液一同流动

左手用于白班，右手用于晚班

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 26.

老茧夜以继日地成长（《车间，我的青春在此搁浅》）

从北方的冰窟开往南方的工厂

咣当声里，我听见体内的骨头

铁锈一样生长（《开往南方的火车》）

螺丝，加班，物料，病历，鲜血……

他看着车间上空飘来飘去的词汇

布满血丝的双眼像溃烂的伤口敞开着

去迎接打工生活里的风雪和盐水（《搬运工》）

如同《我一生中的路还远远没有走完》一样，许立志在这些诗歌中描写的都是在强大外力吞噬下劳工的忍耐、无奈和绝望。与此相对照，《我咽下一枚铁做的月亮……》在某种意义上是一个例外：

我咽下一枚铁做的月亮

他们把它叫做螺丝

我咽下这工业的废水，失业的订单

那些低于机台的青春早早夭亡

我咽下奔波，咽下流离失所

咽下人行天桥，咽下长满水锈的生活

我再咽不下了

所有我曾经咽下的现在都从喉咙汹涌而出

在祖国的领土上铺成一首

耻辱的诗

诗中，一连串的吞咽动作之后是一场爆发式的呕吐。这里的呕吐和吞咽一样是强大的外力下被动的、自发的反应，并不足以终止压迫，但是它毕竟是对“消化”的拒绝，是作为人的劳工对于被融入生产线，物化为牟利工具的拒绝。以前咽下的一切至少可以在这场呕吐中公之于众，成为国家与资本划定的“领土”上的“耻辱”。从这个角度看，许的自杀也可以说是他的最后一场呕吐。以自杀的方式，他永远地离开了生产线，不必再吞咽，也不必再被吞噬。他最终用身体铺成的“耻辱的诗”，不但地点是“在祖国的领土上”，而且时间正是在祖国的生日。

要理解许立志的“我来时很好，去时，也很好”，我们必须理解，在他的“来”和“去”之间充满的是这样的吞咽和呕吐。这样的吞咽和呕吐无法被任何个人化甚至区域化的叙事“消化”，而是全球资本主义生产中的集体性的动作。

拙意

A DIFFERENT KIND OF CONVERSATION

Wandering around my grandfather's small mountain town in Guizhou province, it's not uncommon to see people missing a hand, presumably from factory injuries while working away from home. Guizhou is one of the biggest suppliers of migrant labor to China's coastal cities, especially the Pearl River Delta. Almost everyone has a child or relative working in Guangdong province.

Shaped by Guizhou's history of scarcity, conversation here is materialistic, revolving around how much things cost, or how much so and so is earning per year. Working conditions are not discussed during people's visits home over Chinese New Year. Those who stayed behind know that *dagong* conditions outside the province are tough, but not exactly how tough. I see this in my own family - both sides are eager to avoid the gruesome details. Sometimes locals vie to purchase the very products their relatives are slaving away to produce.

Xu's poetry, with its simple, accessible yet captivating language, exposes the elephant in every home. We are forced to confront the physical, emotional and spiritual toll these jobs take on its workers. My hope is that Xu's poetry finds an audience not just with urban Chinese and international consumers, but also with rural families in China whose children are working in factories like Xu's, so that we can begin a different kind of conversation.

R Luo
writing from Guiding, Guizhou, China

A LIFE NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM DEATH

Even if we thought we already understood, these poems have the power to shock us and force us close to the deadening work and world of that Foxconn factory. With the simplest of words, without lecture or rant, the poet calmly brings us to stand next to him at the workstation, almost as if he continues to work and keeps his eyes on his hands as he answers our questions. Without raging, he expresses rage. He seems to discover his words and images at the same moment we do. Even in translation, the words and images make us feel how a system can make life seem not so different from death.

Ed Mast
Seattle, USA

GHOST IN THE MACHINE: REFLECTIONS ON THE POETRY OF XU LIZHI

Borrowed from the philosophy of mind, specifically critiques of Cartesian conceptions of mind-body duality, the idea of the “ghost in the machine” has taken on new and changing forms of cultural resonance since its introduction in the post war period. Originally the phrase was intended as a diss of Descartes philosophy of mind as a kind of occultist ephemera, a hazy notion of cognition somehow separate from the “mechanical” – biological and chemical – functions of the brain. The idea grew from a materialist determinism of the scientific community in the height of the post-war triumph of capitalism, and drew on a scientific and rationalist worldview that had long animated the industrial revolution, and industrial capital. Belief in ghosts, a human mind, and human affections, outside the machine, industry and the body, was a kind of backward superstition.

Of course in reality, the body, materialism and industrial capital have plenty of ghosts. In Marx’s theory of alienation, the animating spirit of human labor, a defining characteristic at the heart of the “essence of the species”, was removed from working people through the mechanization of production, and more importantly, the loss of control and ownership of the materials of production and human creative activity. Humans, workers, under industrial capital, lost the ability to control their labor, and their lives; they became alienated from their products, their labor, and themselves. People became a kind of living accessory to the machine, ghosts that haunt the process of production and capital formation itself. In his more poetic moments, Marx extended the metaphor, calling capital a kind of “living machine” that derives its animating spirit from the ghosts of labor, from the histories and generations of “dead labor” it sucks and destroys, “vampire-like” in its quest for further profit.

That process continues today, all the more harshly and dramatically in the industrial landscapes of southern coastal China, places like Shenzhen. Here, Xu Lizhi’s life and poetry are embedded in these processes, a testament to the resilience and obstinacy of the human ghost caught in the heat of the inhuman machine. When Xu writes of the “young workers” for whom “industry captures their tears before they have the chance to fall,” he indelibly marks for us the clarity of it all – the dehumanization, alienation, loss of control, of one’s life and even one’s affections, in Foxconn, and other sites of world profit making.

But his poetry does something more. It demands of us a reevaluation of the very materialist conceptions of history from which his, and our, world springs. His “disgraceful poems” push out to us a corporeal person, now a ghost - living, plunging, and falling asleep, in the deadly and deadening machine of the current information economy; his work a humanist affront to the dead economism of the materialist framework.

Of course, the overwhelming tragedy of his work is his suicide. Xu, now a ghost, cannot give us more. His words are silenced, his future insights erased, “before they have a chance to fall.” But there is joy here too, a joy found in resistance, in the assertion of the human. Xu joins the ranks of countless workers lost to capital – the ghosts of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, the Homestead rebellion, the Haymarket martyrs, the Foxconn suicides – whose stories and lives, their very humanness, stand in contrast and resistance to the machine of capital. Echoes of past recriminations of capital could not be more present. To paraphrase August Spies, a Haymarket martyr, the power of their voices are made all the more resonant through their silencing at the hands of the state. They stand to tell us that if given to this machine, all that is left are the ghosts. Xu seemed to understand this too; marking his legacy as one of resistance. In his words “Whether I speak or not / With this society I’ll still / Conflict.” Xu Lizhi, his life and life’s work, are now given over to this great silence in the graveyard of the machine; he, and those like him, are the specter that forever haunts capital. For a poet there can be no greater achievement.

M Reagan
Seattle, USA