This tribute to the resilience of China’s migrant workers is by an academic who lived and worked among them in Shenzhen for seven months, sharing their screams and dreams. It touchingly portrays the plight of young migrant workers, many of them women, who have been caught in the grip of capital’s unscrupulous willingness to sacrifice anything in the pursuit of profit. Their efforts to organise themselves have been at best a partial success.

I went to college just as the turbulent, open-minded 1980s was drawing to a close. I do not know where 1980s China got its energy, its optimism from: everyone was filled with longing and imagination about the country’s future, and nothing was beyond disputation, from economic reforms to political changes to intellectual transformation. I remember everyone carrying books from a famous series on philosophy. A student reading group on China called “Gems of the Yellow River” (Huanghe lang) attracted more than 200, who underwent interviews to join discussion groups.

The Quelling of the Flames

Where was China headed? That seemed to be the common question on the lips of an entire generation. Trends came and went, but there seemed to be no clear answer. So, in the right hand one carried Li Zehou’s History of Modern Chinese Thought, and in the left Liu Xiaofeng’s Freedom and Salvation (Xiaoyao yu zhengjiu). China’s future seemed to hinge on one’s individual pursuits.

At the time, mainstream intellectual currents were more or less shaped by a modernism tinged with the European Enlightenment, and the questions revolved around the obstacles to China’s modernisation. Unfortunately, amid all the clamour, the more pressing questions of contemporary socialist practice were, intentionally or not, sidestepped. I remember a renowned intellectual, Jin Guantao, who used a theory of super-stable structure to explain why China’s development had stagnated. Left-leaning student groups were discontented with the intellectual environment, so, among them, some brought up Marx and post-Marxism, others introduced Nietzsche’s superhuman values. Some puzzled over the predicament of 20th century capitalism, while still others explored the alternative socialism of eastern Europe.

Where was China headed? Thousands of possibilities must have been posed. I had not yet digested these ideas and my mind was still empty when a tragedy drew all this to a close. Since then, no one has followed up on the question. The path forward lost its light, so all one could do was to wander in the dark. Only in daydreams can one occasionally hear the lingering echo of this question.

History and Individual Volition

The 1990s was an inarticulate era. Whether because of coercion or co-optation, intellectuals went into a self-imposed exile of the spirit. Those names that fled the scene disappeared quickly. Intellectual currents went out like the tide, without a sound, leaving...
The Characteristics of Fire

In May 1991, a factory fire consumed the lives of 68 women workers. Amid the grieving, we began to reflect on the problems that a socialist market economy might bring. The fire reflected problems in the labour regulation system, but at the same time it revealed capital’s unscrupulous willingness to sacrifice anything in its pursuit of profit. The marriage of socialist economic planning to a capitalist market truly gave birth to a process with special characteristics, one more capable of transforming society. With the death of thought, the market sprang to life.

Chinese intellectuals were not really exiled. What took their place on the road to “exile” were groups of migrant workers from rural areas not yet conscious of their class position. In the early 1990s, these migrants crowded into the SEZs and embarked on the path of proletarianisation. Unfortunately, the factories set up in these zones with foreign investment often caught fire, and many of those young migrants were burnt to death or maimed in locked workshops and dormitories.

I forget which day it was in the summer of 1991. Around sunset, in a hospital ward in Guangzhou, I saw a female worker lying in her sickbed. Not even 18 years old, her whole body was covered in burns, leaving only her pretty face unharmed. To this day I cannot forget her tranquil yet desperate eyes. As I left the hospital, the sun set blurrily through my tears. That deathly stillness stayed with me through the rest of the decade.

My first real visit to the countryside was two weeks later, when I sought out the victims of the fire and their relatives to provide humanitarian relief. Digging through my old boxes, I now find some notes from that year, faintly legible on yellowing paper.

On May 30, 1991, Xingye Raincoat Factory in Shipai, Dongguan, caught fire, causing 68 deaths and over 40 injuries. The factory was run as a joint venture between mainland industrialist Wang XX and Hong Kong investor Shen XX. Since the factory opened last October, it employed over 120 workers, mostly migrants from other provinces, especially young women from rural areas. The workers all slept in the factory. The doors were locked at night, and the factory was stacked full with flammable plastic materials. When the factory caught fire around two in the morning on 30 May, the workers, unable to flee, either were burned to death or jumped from the windows to their death.

Since many of the victims were from Hubei, in late August 1991, some friends and I went to three villages in Dawu, Hubei, to investigate and provide humanitarian relief.

A Newly Wedded Couple

We took a bumpy four-hour ride on a coach from Hankou, Hubei, to Dawu county, then took a taxi for an hour until we reached Wangyang village. Wangyang has about a thousand residents and consists of eight village teams (cun) – that is, the units that used to be called “production teams” in the Mao-era system of rural collectives. We began enquiring at the entrance to the village and ran into the cousin of a couple who had died in the fire. He led us along a rough path through the hills for about 20 minutes, until we reached the home of the late Zhang Qingbo and Yu Aihong. They had only just wedded – and now it was time for their funeral. The mother began sobbing and calling out the names of her deceased son and daughter-in-law as soon as she heard why we had come. Her crying was like a dirge. The father said the couple had married that spring. The big bed and even the radio in the bridal chamber were new. We noticed that the big red “double happiness” (xi) character had been taken down from the wall, but some traces of the wedding remained, including a photo of the couple by the bed. Later, we heard that Yu had not wanted to get married so early, that she had wanted to earn some money first, but she had finally succumbed to the urgings of her family. Customarily, women gave up their jobs upon marriage, but since the couple had spent over 4,000 yuan on the wedding, mostly borrowed from friends and relatives, both the bride and groom went to work in the raincoat factory where Yu had already been...
After the break, Fatso did not pay their wages until a few days before the fire. The factory’s policy was to pay each month’s wages at the end of the third month worked, so, by the time the fire struck, Fatso had only paid their wages for March and still owed them for April and May, which for Chen amounted to 600 yuan. In the fire, he lost 200 yuan in cash and the clothes, sheets, and blankets he had bought over the past year. All he ended up with was a Transmigration

Leaving the Zhangs, we walked along a small path, past a dozen crumbling houses, to the home of Chen Yibao. He was only 15 when he went to work in the factory in October 1990. At first glance, his face seemed almost childlike. He had broken both his legs, so he hobbled around with a severe limp. But he said it did not hurt any more, and he could now visit people all over the village. We all laughed with the gaiety of guests from afar visiting an old friend.

Chen said after surviving the jump from the fourth floor of the burning factory, he was no longer afraid of anything. In the wee hours of 30 May, he had just fallen asleep when he heard the screams of his female colleagues. At first he thought they were playing around, but then he heard a clamour inside the building, and everyone was rushing down to the third floor. He jumped from his bed and it occurred to him there might be a fire. He opened the door to look for someone to ask and smoke poured into the room, almost suffocating him. Without thinking, he moved to the window. There seemed to be a mysterious force telling him to jump, and without a moment’s hesitation, he did.

When his feet touched the ground, he opened his eyes, and he felt as though his soul had transmigrated – only he had chosen to be a human again.

Chen was not the youngest person working at Xingye Raincoat Factory; there were two 14-year-olds, and he was worried about what had happened to them. In the factory, he used to joke around and make mischief, for which he was often scolded by “Fatso” (feilao), the on-site boss. He said most of the workers, both male and female, were like rocks, never moving from their seats, and the longer they worked there, the more rigid they became. Often he got so stir-crazy he wanted to just get up, leave the factory and go for a walk, but he always managed to suppress this impulse. After returning from Chinese New Year in February, he worked for three months till the fire without a single day off, even on Sundays. If he was not stir-crazy, his belly gurgled with hunger. From seven in the morning to midnight, they only had two meals, both limited to stir-fried green vegetables with a few indigestible pieces of pork rind and a bowl of rice. They were not even allowed to get second helpings. Once when he asked for a little more rice, he was scolded by the kitchen manager, who happened to be Fatso’s wife.

Along with 10 workmates, he slept in prison-like conditions, in a little room partitioned from the others with cardboard. Two big mattresses were spread on bunks made by nailing together a few boards, six people slept on the bottom bunk and five on top. Chen said it was impossible to sleep in the summer, six people squeezed together without even an electric fan to cut the 34 degree Celsius heat. This often led to friction among the male workers.

When he did fall asleep, the most he could sleep was six hours, and on several occasions Fatso beat him for nodding off at work. Sometimes he got so angry he wanted to fight back, but in the end he always restrained himself. Using the welding machine to make raincoats required a lot of concentration. After returning from the break in February he was reassigned to attach hoods to the coats for two yuan per hundred coats. He could do 600 a day on average, sometimes as many as 800, but he often burned himself due to sleep deprivation. If the burn was serious he could take a break for a few hours, but most of the time he could not even do this. After the boss deducted 40 yuan for living expenses, he made about 300 yuan a month.

He did not go home for Chinese New Year in 1991 because he did not want to spend the 100 yuan for transportation, so he just mailed 200 yuan to his parents. He was really homesick, but Fatso had said he would have to deposit 50 yuan to keep his job if he went home, whereas if he stayed at the factory he would receive a bonus of 3.5 yuan a day for living expenses. Then Fatso reneged on his word, and he and the others who stayed at the factory during the month-long break ended up having to pay for living expenses out of their small savings.

After the break, Fatso did not pay their wages until a few days before the fire. The factory’s policy was to pay each month’s wages at the end of the third month worked, so, by the time the fire struck, Fatso had only paid their wages for March and still owed them for April and May, which for Chen amounted to 600 yuan. In the fire, he lost 200 yuan in cash and the clothes, sheets, and blankets he had bought over the past year. All he ended up with was

A Transmigration

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with was a couple of broken legs. Now I think of him every time I hear the following song.

**Injured on the Job (To the tune of “Xiao cao”)**

Without a groan
Without a moan
This is how I took my injury
Some people sigh
Some people cry
Look how the infirmary overflows with injured workmates
Machine
Oh, machine
Please don't go berserk again
Workmates
Oh, workmates
Please be careful on the job
Fingers
Oh, toes
Why did you have to leave me?
Enterprise
Oh, boss
You’d better compensate me!

Those migrant workers who were not killed in the fire, those who were doomed to live, underwent transmigration: they began to develop class consciousness. Chen's smiling face and broken legs speak volumes about the will to live and its inevitable conflict with a society dominated by capital. Who but this 15-year-old migrant could better understand the nature of capital, the meaning of the market economy, and his class position?

**Two Women Who Survived**

This is the path China's migrant workers have travelled, and often it has been a one-way street. Below is an account by two women, Yu Xiazheng and Yu Caihua, who survived the fire.

Before the Chinese New Year in 1990, eight of us from the same village team went to Dongguan to look for work. We ran across an announcement that a raincoat factory was hiring. At that time it was called Salon Raincoat Factory, and people called it “the old factory.” In October 1990, Fatso tore it down and built a new factory with investment from Hong Kong, changing the name to Xingye. In our first month we only made an average of 200 yuan each, even though we worked seven days a week from seven in the morning to midnight. During rush periods we even had to work all night. Among our workmates were people from Guangdong, Guangxi, Sichuan, and Jiangxi, and we from Hubei. We think it is fair to say that we worked the hardest. Since we were from a remote mountain area, we were fearless and clueless, and we thought we were lucky just to find a job. We worked fast, so by the second month we were making 300 or 400 yuan. Sometimes we felt we could not take it any more and thought about quitting, but then we thought, “If the others can handle it, why can’t I?” and we persevered.

We worked at the old factory for four months till it closed in July to relocate, and until the new factory opened in October, we did not receive any of our back wages. Fatso also promised to give us 3.5 yuan a day for living expenses during the interim, but he never gave that. Once we approached him and asked for money so we could go home, but he said the factory would re-open soon and he would then give us the back wages and the living stipend. In August, we wrote a group letter to the Shipai Labour Department asking for help in getting our back wages, but we never got a reply. Later we heard that we were ineligible for any kind of protection under the labour law because we were not formal contract workers.

In October, Fatso had the new factory. Since the old factory did not have any money to pay us, Fatso said he would pay us and no longer withhold our monthly wages if we started working at the new factory. So the eight of us complied. In the end, however, after working from October to January, we only received three months wages. On several occasions, when we approached Fatso about this, he would give us 30 or 50 yuan – of course to be deducted from our monthly wages. We spent most of this on food, since the factory only provided two small meals for each 14-hour workday. Whenever we got a chance we would go out and buy some tofu with peppers from a street vendor. At home we eat spicy food, so we really could not stand the bland food provided by the factory.

The factory had two buildings. One was two stories, with 15 new welding machines on the first floor, and 12 old welding machines and two button-attaching machines on the second. The other building had four stories, with storage and cutting tables on the first floor, more cutting tables on the second floor, more storage and men's sleeping quarters on the third floor, and sleeping quarters for both male and female workers on the fourth. After the Chinese New Year in February, our back wages were further withheld to buy those 15 new welding machines. Fatso was in charge of the day-to-day management of the factory, and the Hong Kong boss only came once a month or so. But the latter often sent an accountant named Liu to act on his behalf, and sometimes he would stay for over a week at a time. When he came in mid-May, we asked him about our wages. He said the company was using the money to expand and buy the new machines, but that we would be paid soon. He even pointed to a dozen or so newly installed electric fans in the workshop and said, “All this equipment costs money. How else could we afford it?”

Yu Caihua’s job was to attach collars to the raincoats. She was paid 1.8 yuan per 100 coats, and she could do between 1,000 and 1,500 a day, depending on how energetic she felt. One month she earned as much as 600 yuan. Yu Xiazheng’s job was to attach sleeves. She was paid at the same rate, but she usually could not do more than 1,000 a day, so she earned about 400 yuan a month. These piece rates were not stable: the boss would lower them if we did them more quickly. In May, for example, he lowered the rate for attaching hoods from 1.5 yuan per 100 to 1.2.

They never installed electric fans in our sleeping quarters, where over 90 workers slept on the same floor, and we continued to breathe the same air as in the workshops. When the weather started getting hot in April, many of the male workers could not take it any more and went up to the roof to sleep, but we girls had to stay in our rooms. When we got off work at midnights, we really wanted to go out to the street, stretch our legs and breathe some fresh air, but the factory doors would be locked.

When the building caught fire at 2 in the morning on 30 May, we could not get out through the doors, so we had to jump from the windows of the third and fourth floors. No one survived the jump without injury, and several died. Yu Xiazheng jumped from the third floor, but her sister did not and was burnt to death. Yu Caihua also jumped from the third floor, and our friend Zhang Lin from the fourth. All of us injured our legs and hips, and Zhang Lin also burnt her hand.

One might say this fire left a black spot on “the socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics”, but I think it would be more accurate to say it illuminated the scars and silence that were unique to the 1990s.

**Whose Voices Are Calling Out?**

I am not sure how migrant workers made it through the 1990s, those countless desperate days longing for some light, chasing little shadows. I hope to shed a little light on the cold, dark passage traversed by these workers.

Leaving the village, I had a new desire: to enter a factory and witness the life of migrant workers, to enter their lives and search for the rays of hope behind those scars. In the spring of 1995 I got a...
job at an electronics factory in Shenzhen, where I could live and work with 500 migrants. Their countless stories filled my previously empty and dreamless days. Their laughter and tears led me to understand that the sense of inability to change is a negation of life.

The factory was neither this era’s prison cell nor a place of refuge from the hardships and poverty of rural life. It was a mutant child of capital that could both take away workers’ lives and give them their only hope of survival. China became the world’s workshop and provided a touchstone for the dream of modernisation. Since the 1990s, almost every young person from rural China, no matter which part, has been a potential factory worker. In the factory dormitories, the workers not only complain about the work but also find ways to entertain themselves, ridicule the cruelty of capital, and dream about how to transform their fate. In my dorm, a women worker used to wake me up in the middle of the night with her screams: what could be a more direct way of denouncing our era’s loss of imagination, thinking and action?

Lately my dreams have been about self-transformation and looking for China’s strength and determination for regeneration. But as an academic incapable of self-transformation, the deeper I entered the world of migrant workers, the more I became aware of my distance from them. Not only could I not become one of them, I was also rejected. Many years later, I still cannot forget what one woman worker said to me: “Your world does not belong here, there is no need for you to stay in the factory enduring hardship. You may as well go back home.”

But I could not go home. I could not also become one of them, but I knew that my fate was inseparable from theirs. I wanted the workers to understand that I was also a passing traveller of the era, homeless and wandering at the margins of society.

Browsing through a collection of migrant workers’ literature from the late 1990s, I ran across a poem by a woman worker named Zhang Bingbing.

**Where Is the Path?**

The sky is blue  
The sun is blazing  
The crowds are bustling  
Only I have something heavy weighing down my heart  
Watching the people rushing here and there  
My heart is bleeding  
Like a lost little lamb  
I don’t know where to go, where to go!  
In this big metropolis, Shenzhen  
Could it be that I really don’t have a shady green patch to call my own?  
Where is the path?

Migrant workers ask: what should I do? What should I do tomorrow? If we have a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, then we must also have proletarianisation with Chinese characteristics. What kind of answer can be given by a society that only wants the power of labour without the labourers? In the face of exploitation, discrimination and apathy, the city can only be an eternally foreign land.

No one could find a better way, and we were not willing to just leave. So we decided to found our own organisation: the Chinese Working Women’s Network (CWWN). At first, when we founded it in 1996, we just called it the Women’s Network. The basic idea was to bring together female migrant workers from all over, break down the boundaries of place and ethnicity, and construct a forum for them. The first group of core volunteers was 12 workers from the Meteor Electronics Factory where I had worked.

Reading their names brings back memories of discussing plans late at night in the dorm after working overtime. After being tricked and taken advantage of so many times in the city, they were worried about how to build trust about the organisation among other workers. We set this problem aside and began discussing the organisation’s mission: to promote labour rights, raise feminist consciousness, popularise knowledge of occupational safety, and put into practice autonomous action by women workers. At the time no one entertained the idea of establishing a physical centre for the organisation – what with the lack of capital and civil society, it would be a major accomplishment just to have a rootless network.

Perhaps it was destiny that in the spring of 1996, after fruitless appeals for assistance to numerous offices of the local and provincial governments, an enthusiastic woman emerged from the Nanshan district branch of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). With her help, we established the first centre for women workers in the Shenzhen SEZ. It opened in May, and the chair and other cadres of the Nanshan ACFTU branch attended the opening ceremony. Every night since then, the centre has been packed with workers from the surrounding factories.

The centre often hosts educational lectures about labour rights, women’s health, occupational safety, sex, and so on, the idea being to strengthen women workers’ awareness of their rights and how to protect themselves. The centre also tries to extend the network to workers’ dormitories throughout the area. Dorm network personnel have become an important bridge between the centre and women workers, developing solidarity and the spirit of mutual aid and concern. The centre’s methods are flexible and creative, including artistic performances related to health and safety, reading groups, handicrafts, courses in English and Cantonese, poetry and art, film screenings and discussions, photography, and drama. These activities help migrant women to express themselves, reflect on their collective identity as “working sisters”, and look for their own subjectivity.

Marginalised workers are finally making a warm home in a corner of this cold city. One woman shared the story of her struggle in a magazine published by the CWWN called *Confiding Among Sisters* (*Jiemei miyu*).

**How Can You See a Rainbow without Going through the Rain?**

Ah-Hong had already worked at a certain factory for four years when something made her almost lose her job. Her mother came from their home in Sichuan to visit her. Ah-Hong had not seen her mother for several years, so she asked her supervisor for two days off to accompany her. Since all requests for leave of over four hours required authorisation by a
manager, she first asked her supervisor and then asked the workshop manager.

The workshop manager not only rejected Ah-Hong’s request without asking why she wanted two days off, he even took away her leave application slip. So all she could do was ask her supervisor for a four-hour break that evening. The supervisor granted that, and she happily went and accompanied her mother. Her mother had just arrived from a two-day bus trip, and now she had to turn around and leave after only a day’s rest. The next morning Ah-Hong asked her supervisor for another four hours off to take her mother to the bus station, and he again agreed. After seeing off her mother, that afternoon she went back to work as usual, only to find that her punch card was missing. She asked the security guard and he said the workshop manager had confiscated it. She decided to go on to work and then look for the manager that evening. When she did, the manager told her to go get her supervisor. When she came back with her supervisor, the manager accused her of taking leave without authorisation. What kind of reasoning was that?

The next morning, Ah-Hong went to work as usual only to find a mark for unauthorised absence on her punch card, and she went to talk to the manager. The manager not only brushed her off, he even threw her card on the floor. That made her so angry that she could not help talking back, and in response, he fired her on the spot.

Ah-Hong did not know what else to do but go looking for another job. While she was looking, she ran across some books (about labour rights), and she learned that her rights had been violated, so she decided to use the law as a weapon for defending herself.

First, she wrote a complaint, planning to mail it to the Labour Department. But then it occurred to her that doing so might cause problems for her co-workers, so instead she submitted it to the factory manager, planning to go to the Labour Department in person if he ignored it. As it turned out, as soon as the manager saw the letter, he told her to come back to work. But she still was not content with the situation. So, after consulting her friends, she approached the factory manager and made three requests: (1) to be transferred to another department to avoid further problems with the workshop manager; (2) to be reimbursed the wage docked for her “unauthorised absence”; and (3) to be promised that she would not be harassed or fired without just cause.

The manager agreed, and Ah-Hong went back to work. This experience helped her to grow from weak to strong.

The cwnn has survived not only because of one or two frontline organisers and a group of enthusiastic women workers who donate their scarce free time, but also several social workers from Hong Kong. If it were not for them, the network may have already become history.

**Centenary Aspirations**

The light re-emerged from the clouds. In the summer of 2000, another group of enthusiastic and sincere community organisers appeared on the scene. They had no doubt that their identity was different from that of the workers, but they tried to look for possibilities for mutual transformation. The first question they asked me was, how should intellectuals interact with workers? Inside, I thought this question ironic, but was moved by their sincerity. Having struggled with an “intellectual” identity for years, I had always fled from the heavy burden it entailed. So, though their question did not make me reflect anew on this inescapable identity, it gave us all new hope. Through their efforts, cwnn compiled a collection of migrants’ oral histories and established a cooperative store.

After years of hard work, the network established study groups in women’s factory dorms, libraries, mutual aid groups, and rights support groups. In 2000 it also established an express service for helping women in three of Shenzhen’s industrial districts. The 2000 issue of *Confiding Among Sisters* ran this announcement.

For four months the Women’s Health Express (whe) has been serving the industrial districts of the Pearl River Delta, coming into contact with over 12,000 women. In addition to supplying literature about women, occupational safety, health, and labour rights, the whe also provides simple physical examinations. Women may also borrow books from a portable library on the whe van.

In order to help our sisters better understand their physical condition, in August we will begin preparing individual health records. Although the whe provides multiple services, we know it still cannot meet all the needs of our sisters. So please give us suggestions about how to improve our service.

Since our numbers are limited, we hope to recruit a group of volunteers from the industrial districts. By volunteering for just a few hours a week, you can train yourself while helping and sharing love with your working sisters. Please contact us for details.

We also invite readers to write about their own experiences as migrant working women and submit them to *Confiding Among Sisters* for publication.

In 2001, a group of women workers began to use oral history to give voice to their situation and search for their own identity. Their stories had not ended, their fate made them again ponder: how can we survive independently? How can we escape from the sweatshops without going back to the patriarchal life in the countryside? The experiences of cooperatives in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan piqued their interest. And after several months of excited discussions, five of them established the Working Women’s Consumer Cooperative in August 2002.

As an experiment, they hoped this cooperative would help highly mobile migrants find a way out of their abominable situation. But one woman summed up her years of experience organising fellow migrants by saying, “Although we have cultivated a group of women, most of them will go home in a few years. There is no way to raise our economic status, and there is still no way to overcome the traditional fate of women.”

Under the operational logic of global and local capital, the identity, status, and expectations of migrant workers seem to be predetermined, doomed beyond any hope of resistance. The idea behind founding the cooperative was encouraging women to develop their ability to support themselves independently through cooperation, while at the same time dealing collectively with some of their everyday needs and strengthening the women’s network. Through alternative economic activities, they aimed to help other migrant women learn to organise themselves, engender the spirit of being in control of...
their lives (dang jia zuo zhu), and ultimately create a new collective subjectivity.

The days when everyone could feel proud did not last long. When the sun set, all that remained were row upon row of shadows cast by the street lamps.

Before the co-op had a chance to mature, or even to recover from its birth pangs, it was struck by the work-related injuries and deaths that are so common in the Pearl River Delta. A frontline organiser told me, “Another tragedy has occurred: an 18-year-old girl has committed suicide because she could not stand the pain caused by occupational poisoning.” Confiding Among Sisters published this obituary.

In Memory of Flowers

At five o’clock in the morning on 2 November 2003, because of an occupational poisoning, an 18-year-old girl jumped to her death from the window of a hospital in Guangzhou. In the blossom of her youth, just like that, her brief existence came to an end. The very next day at the same hospital, another 18-year-old girl, suffering from benzene poisoning and finding the treatment ineffective, quietly left this world ...

The rose outside the window,
Silently withered away in the cruel wind last night,
A blossoming rose.
A lovely sight to behold,
Disappeared.
To reach the sunlight,
To absorb the dew,
To bloom more brilliantly,
She stretched out her leaves,
Into the cruel wind.
Life is too weak,
It can’t endure wind and rain;
Life is too childlike
It can’t endure cruel reality.

The rose outside the window,
Silently withered away in the cruel wind last night,
A blossoming rose.
Today’s sun,
Rose from the east as usual,
The wind clustered as usual,
The sun couldn’t feel the withering of the rose,
The wind couldn’t understand her premature death.
Cold and indifferent,
Scoffing and sneering,
Are their faces.

The rose outside the window,
Silently withered away in the cruel wind last night,
A blossoming rose.
Before she had a chance to enjoy the sun’s warmth,
Before she had a chance to feel the caress of the spring breeze,
She was snapped off by a calloused hand,
She’s still lying in the mud.
Her fragrance still lingers,
Her petals are still intact,
Perhaps an affectionate boy,
Is still waiting to give this rose to his new bride.

The rose outside the window,
Silently withered away in the cruel wind last night,
A blossoming rose.

I could not suppress my anguish. No matter how much effort we expended, how many nights of sleep we sacrificed, we could not make a dent in the Pearl River Delta’s rate of 100,000 occupational injuries a year. A pessimistic mood led me to have doubts about the directions of the women’s centre and the cooperative. Were community-based rights protection services and a cooperative economy capable of responding to this continuous stream of injuries and deaths? What kind of force could more effectively change how the world’s workshop operates? How could migrant workers better increase their power?

In 2004, CWWN was at the height of its eight years of activity. In November, we opened another women’s centre and an occupational safety and health centre in the Bao’an district of Shenzhen. The opening ceremony was attended not only by cadres from the Communist Youth League, the Volunteer Federation, and the Health Department, but also professors from Peking University, Sun Yat-sen University, and Shenzhen University and representatives from several mainland organisations for women and workers. The volunteers’ singing and dancing at the ceremony attracted over 400 workers from the area.

Such lustre has no firm foundation. Though we had broad-based support, when the state began to fear that post-socialist Eurasia’s “coloured revolutions” would spread to China, the development of civil society ground to a halt. Today, CWWN has made it through, but the path seems to get harder each year. The co-op has gone out of business. The bookstore closed even before it got a chance to open. The fate of the women’s centres seems as precarious as that of the migrant workers themselves.

Where is the path?
I feel guilty for losing the comrades who have already left. The organisers still persevering on the frontlines fill me with respect, with the conviction that the path is here, right beneath our feet.

NOTES

1  “Development Is Indisputable Truth” (fazhan shi ying daoli) is a saying of Deng Xiaoping popularised in the 1990s. – Trans.
3  The average exchange rate in 1991 was one Chinese yuan to 0.19 US dollar, so 4,000 yuan would have been about $760. – Trans.
4  Here “village fees” refers to tiliu, the fees collected by village committees to finance public works such as irrigation. The amount was set by the provincial government according to each region’s per capita income. The fees were phased out after 2004, along with most other rural fees and the agricultural tax. – Trans.
5  By Yang Xuan.
6  By Ri Yue.

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