

Living in the Failure of Time: Life Rupture in Xu Lizhi's Poetry

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Abstract. This paper examines how Xu Lizhi's poetry turns time into a central site of social violence. The paper does not simply view Xu as a tragic individual case but suggests that his poems are a sign of more general temporal crisis of the new generation of migrant workers in reform-era China. Taking close reading and the idea of time poverty, work-discipline and time-space compression, the analysis reveals that the factory schedules, assembly-line rhythms and the repetitive migration of labor restructures life into pieces, which no longer sustain rest, growth, and meaningful future. Day and night in the poems of Xu are deprived of their natural order, sleep is imposed in the position of work, and youth is not the time of growth but of untimely fatigue. The paper goes on to suggest that this broken temporality creates an identity crisis, where migrant workers are lured into the city as a source of labor force and excluded as a part of the social fabric. Xu Lizhi's poetry is therefore read as a testimony to the failure of time itself, that is, a condition in which time no longer enables life to unfold but instead becomes a medium of exhaustion, suspension, and rupture.

Keywords: Xu Lizhi, failure of time, migrant worker poetry, youth, factory labor

1. Introduction

Xu Lizhi is one of the most important voices in contemporary Chinese migrant worker poetry because his poems connect intimate exhaustion with the larger structure of industrial labor. His brief life, his work in electronics factories, and his suicide have made him a potent symbol in the world of literature criticism as well as in public discussion. Yet the force of his poetry does not rest on biography alone. Again and again, Xu returns to night shifts, insomnia, repetitive motion, failed rest, premature aging, and the blocked future of youth. These repetitive images imply that the greatest crisis of his work is temporal. It is not just the body of a worker or the dream of a young man that is destroyed, but time as the means by which life is usually given rhythm, continuity, and direction [1,2].

This paper therefore approaches Xu Lizhi's poetry through the concept of the failure of time. The term is not merely a reference to failure over time as though time were a neutral background on which success and failure occur. It is rather a state of time when time itself is no longer conducive to life. The institutional rhythms replace the natural rhythms, rest is drained by work, the future is robbed of its role as a horizon of development in the factory system. The time is not less, just that it is occupied by work, stress and monotony instead of progress. Seen from this perspective, Xu's

poems are not only records of suffering. They are condensed maps of a damaged temporal order [3,4].

The paper is methodologically based on close reading and puts the chosen poems in A New Day in the discussion with the critical work on work-discipline, acceleration, burnout, and structural failure. It is not intended to diminish literature to sociology, but to demonstrate that poetic language is a form of lived experience whose expression is particularly incisive. The poems of Xu Lizhi are short, concrete and sometimes almost documentary in nature, but the images in them are highly theoretical. The discussion is done in four parts.. It first reviews existing approaches to Xu Lizhi and identifies the value of a structural reading of failure. It then outlines the paper's analytical framework. Finally, it examines the poems through two central problems: compressed time under the factory system and disallowed youth under conditions of blocked futurity [5,6].

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1. Xu Lizhi, migrant worker poetry, and structural failure

Studies of Xu Lizhi tend to start with his location in the context of the dagong poetry, which is a literature of migration, factory work and non-even access to modernity in the city. Poetry in this area is a form where workers can speak back to their systems that normally present them as labor power only. Critics have thus emphasized a number of overlapping dimensions of the work by Xu: its documentary worth, its moral power, its aestheticization of humiliation and pain, and its representative position in the social history of migrant labor. He Xuefeng and Bai Yang, among others, interpret the poetry of Xu in terms of the connection between the death of the poet and the renaissance of art, and focus on how the literary form transforms the social harm into the witnessing and criticism [5].

This scholarly work is necessary, yet time is frequently a peripheral matter in it. There is a description of exhaustion, repetition, hopelessness, and physical emptiness but the issue of how time itself is restructured is not necessarily put into the limelight. This is important since the poems of Xu are not just a representation of hard working conditions. They keep on questioning what happens to a life that can no longer occupy its own time. In that regard, the current paper builds upon previous literature and makes the problem of temporality the most important one to analyze. It implies that the significance of Xu Lizhi is not just in the fact that he presents the suffering workers, but he could demonstrate how the labor regimes transform the very conditions in which a self may exist continuous [2,5].

Recent research in the area of critical failure is also advantageous to this shift. Failure here is not merely the title of individual weakness, poor decisions, or inability to adjust. It is created by institutions, infrastructures, unequal social arrangements that render certain lives challenging to maintain in the first place [1,6]. It is this view that comes in handy particularly when reading Xu Lizhi since he rarely collapses in his poetry. The poems play a gradual depletion. Days and nights repeat. Sleep weakens. The body continues to work, but personhood is slim and weak. Structural failure therefore contributes to removing the conversation on isolated tragedy and shifting towards the commonplace situations that make exhaustion a common occurrence.

2.2. Time poverty, work-discipline, and time-space compression

The discussion is framed in three concepts. The former is the description of work-Discipline by E. P. Thompson, where modernity of industry substituted the task-based rhythms with the abstract time of

clock and the bodies of workers being trained to follow the schedules planned to be productive [2]. Although Xu Lizhi writes in a very different historical setting, the basic issue remains relevant. Factory time does not merely count labor. It controls life, as it determines when workers are awake, on the move, eat, sleep, and get tired. In Xu's poems, this discipline is no longer experienced as a transition into modern order. It appears as temporal domination embedded in the ordinary routines of the workshop.

The second concept is Byung-Chul Han's notion of time poverty. Time poverty does not simply mean that a person has too many tasks and too little free time. It refers to a state where nearly all of the time is occupied by work, acting, and survival, and there is little time to be left to linger, meditate, or introspect [3,7]. In the case of high-intensity production in which migrant workers are employed, it implies that personal time is extracted in layers. Even time spent not directly engaged in labor is planned according to exhaustion, rest and the preparation of the next shift. The outcome is not just busyness. The shrinking of time is that which can truly be a part of the self.

The third notion is the time-space compression by David Harvey. Harvey states that contemporary capitalism is always rearranging time and space to accelerate the circulation and decrease impediments to accumulation [4]. In the case of migrant workers, this is perceived spatially and on a temporal basis. They abandon inland houses to coastal production areas, yet they also dive into the realm where every hour and physical movement is incorporated into the pace of production. When put together, these three ideas explain why the poems of Xu Lizhi are full of time contradictions. Time is thick but hollow, mobile but stagnant, quick in consumption and stagnant with regard to social outcome. The poems therefore make visible a temporal regime in which movement does not produce development and repetition does not create continuity.

3. Compressed time: disrupted life rhythms under the factory system

3.1. Institutional time and the loss of natural rhythm

One of Xu Lizhi's most striking insights is that factory life does not simply occupy time. It substitutes the natural and bodily time with the institutional time. Day and night are no longer followed by contact with the world as in the line "no sun during the day shift, no moon during the night shift. They are restructured through rotating shifts and schedules of production [8]. This picture is effective as it indicates a lack which is both physical and symbolical. The moon and sun are there, but lost out of experience. Workers are no longer living within the most primitive time of life. What should turn the body now lives on as a lost thing.

This is a greater loss than inconvenience. The circadian rhythm, sleeping at night and waking up in the day are not small habits but fundamental forms of embodied life. Once these rhythms are placed under the machine, time ceases to be a life-affirming order. This is not expressed in abstract theory but in bare images through the poetry of Xu. The body of the worker is no longer able to understand whether it is day or night, or simply the clock of production. There the collapse of time starts at the stage of common sense. The time does not cease to pass, yet it does not drag the body through an environmentally friendly process of work and rest [2,3]. This reasoning can also be found in the line where he writes, so many days, so many nights, I just fell asleep standing. Sleep, such as should follow labor, is compelled into the same attitude as that of labor [8]. The wording used by Xu renders the image impossible and ordinary at the same time. That tension matters. It implies that the state of overworking has become so common that it is even discussed in a flat tone. The poem is non-dramatic collapse; it documents the way collapse becomes part of ordinary life. By so doing,

sleep is no longer distinct to work. It is forced into tiny and broken gaps that cannot bring about the body or bring back time to the self.

3.2. Assembly-line repetition and fragmented life time

Xu Lizhi also reveals that assembly line reduces time into units that cannot contain experience. The body itself is divided by the work schedules in the line the left hand to the day shift, the right hand to the night shift [8]. Hands have been separated out of personhood and made replaceable parts. It is not just physical alienation. It is temporal alienation. Every movement is the part of a slot, every slot is the part of a shift, and every shift is the part of a cycle of infinite repetition. What is lost is the feeling that time builds up to a story of life. It is not that we are not in repetition, but development does not. This can be used to understand why Xu tends to portray days as the same and reversible reels that play repeatedly without actual transformation. The linear time that ought to be moving back to the present to a future that is open is flattened into cyclical sequence. The employee is aware of the fact that time is moving as he or she becomes tired and receives a salary, yet the time does not become meaningful time. The body is time consuming and time consuming is the body. The description of industrial discipline given by Thompson can be helpful here, yet the poems by Xu go beyond it as well. Not only are they the measure of the labor time, but the more profound hollowing out of life time itself [2,8].

This fragmentation is furthered outside the assembly line by repetitive movement in, out and back into factories. Such mobility, on the face of it, implies choice. Employees seem capable of quitting one facility and finding another that offers a higher salary or environment. But in fact this circulation tends to break and not expand life. Every new contract requires quick adaptation. Earlier relations dissolve. Experience is not permitted to rest itself in an uninterrupted story. The work of Hartmut Rosa on social acceleration can be used to shed light on this paradox: movement gains strength, and orientation becomes weak [9]. Such a world is precisely documented in the poetry of Xu Lizhi. The time is swirling on in the expenditure of labor, and the self is in the identical precarious situation.

4. Disallowed youth: fractured life time and identity dilemma

4.1. Premature aging and the collapse of growth

In Xu Lizhi's writing on youth, what stands out is not romance, friendship, campus life, or discovery. It is fatigue, dozing, insomnia and the slow wearing down of the body.. Youth therefore appears not as a period that opens toward the future, but as a form of life time that is rapidly compressed and prematurely brought to an end. The line "at twenty, I only stuck my head out and caught a glimpse of myself at seventy" condenses this logic with unusual force [8]. The image skips the decades in between. What should be the long middle of life disappears. Youth looks directly toward old age, weakness, and death.

This temporal leap should not be dismissed as exaggeration. It is an expression of the lived experience of high-intensity work over a long period of time, poor sleep, and constant psychological pressure. Under such conditions, life is driven to skip stages of exploration and formation and head instead for exhaustion and decline. This is why Xu can also write that in the workshop his youth has run aground [8]. The workshop is not only a place of employment. It is the place where youth loses its forward motion. Instead of launching life into a larger future, it stops life inside a closed and repetitive space.

Once youth is reorganized this way, the meaning of growth itself is changed. Growth no longer suggests accumulation of experience or widening of freedom. It becomes deeper adaptation to exhaustion. Each improvement in work skill may also represent a deeper adjustment of the body to repetition. Each moment of learning reality may also signal a further loss of belief in change. This change is explained by the thoughts of Han on burnout and the loss of lingering help. Exhausted time does not merely speed life up. It kills time in itself, and desire and memory and anticipation can hardly grow in a lasting manner [3,7]. Xu Lizhi's poetry is powerful because it captures this theft of youth at the level of temporal form.

4.2. Speed, stagnation, and blocked futurity

The temporal experience in Xu Lizhi's poetry is not fast or slow. It takes the form of a disordered structure in which acceleration and stagnation coexist. The year may be coming to an end, but the months seem to be agonizingly long. Objective time is fast and subjective time is lengthless. On the surface, life seems to be mobile: employees switch shifts, plants and cities. workers change shifts, factories, and cities. From within, however, there is little sense of progress. No matter how much movement takes place, social position remains fixed. Time resembles a conveyor belt that keeps the body moving while leaving life in the same place [4,9].

This paradox is crucial for understanding Xu's treatment of the future. Once youth loses its orientation toward what comes next, it can no longer function as a time of preparation. The future in these poems is not only emotionally dim. It is structurally blocked. Insecure labor, poor social connections, and low educational capital, preclude the horizon. Increased labor, increased exhaustion and increased cost of living seem more real than any chance of change. Even hope is hard to arrange in such a time sequence.

4.3. The city and suspended identity

Xu's damaged temporality is also tied to the migrant worker's unstable relation to the city. The city is a place of wages, modernity, and potentially even reinvention to young workers, but it also keeps them out with the broader division of productive inclusion and social belonging. The city needs migrant workers to continue with its manufacturing life although they are not exactly viewed as urban subjects. Youth is then suspended between rural and urban, departure and settlement, aspiration and impossibility. The identity is never complete since the future that it is supposed to be stabilized with is always postponed [4,9].

Viewed in this perspective, the poetry of Xu Lizhi does not represent suicide as something that can be disconnected with history and made a completely personal issue. It is positioned at the periphery of a time sequence where the present is drained of weariness, the past is unable to be incorporated in a self-sustaining discourse and the future is shut down before it is born. This does not make the poems biographical. Instead, it assists in understanding the reason why Xu has made his writing so representative. His poems provide language to a collective system where life is maintained in motion to be produced whilst being deprived of time of inhabiting the world as a person [5,6].

5. Discussion

There is also a temporal reading of Xu Lizhi that has a consequence on the discussion of contemporary Chinese literature in general. The writing of migrant workers is usually treated as a

social testimony and thus can be either morally admired or used as a documentary. The two moves are explainable though they tend to make literature form flat. The poetry of Xu does not comply with that flattening since the damage of time in his poetry is not merely written as a content. It is constructed into image, rhythm and structure. Fucose lines, sudden transitions, and dull diction expound a surface of poetry where time is sliced, reduced, and worn out. The poems therefore do not merely report temporal violence. They perform it in literary form, while still preserving a space for reflection that the factory itself denies [5,8].

This reading also touches on why Xu Lizhi continues to be important beyond the moment of his death. His poetry gathers together several central contradictions of contemporary labor modernity: mobility without arrival, visibility without recognition, youth without expansion, and survival without inhabitable time. At the same time, the paper has limits. It focuses on temporality rather than on other important dimensions such as gender, regional difference, and the wider media circulation of Xu's image. These issues deserve further study. Nevertheless, the collapse of time is still a helpful prism since it links the bodily fatigue, social marginalization, and poetic structure without diminishing any of them to the other.

6. Conclusion

Reading Xu Lizhi through the failure of time makes it possible to see why his poetry carries such force in contemporary Chinese literary criticism. The poems are not merely records of factory misery, and the narrative of a personal tragedy wears them not. They demonstrate the restructuring of the temporal foundation of personhood itself by labor regimes. Xu exposes the world where time does not support life but is rather a medium of exhaustion and suspension through pictures of shift work, lack of sleep, fragmented body work, premature aging, a speed without progress and youth without futurity. The greater meaning of migrant worker poetry is also made clear in this reading. Exploitation is not the only thing that such writing exposes. It shows the way in which contemporary industrial systems destroy the rhythms in which individuals are made social subjects.

After movement ceases to bring about development and youth are devoured before they can even be experienced, identity becomes trapped between production and exclusion. The poetry of Xu Lizhi is strong due to the fact that the language he uses is concrete, compressed and historically based, but he is able to name a condition that is bigger than itself. What does not work in these poems is not just a worker or a dream, but the fact that time can also be part of life.

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