



A Proletarian Nora

Discussing Fan Yusu

Federico PICERNI

In 2017, migrant worker Fan Yusu became an overnight sensation in China after publishing her memoir online. Despite the fact that she has produced several more literary works, her artistic production is seldom considered from a literary perspective. To fill this gap, this essay endeavours to analyse some of the main elements that shape Fan's output, arguing that it is an exemplar of contemporary working-class literature.

When Fan Yusu published online her autobiography in April 2017, it became a sensation overnight. 'I Am Fan Yusu' (我是范雨素), her story as a rural-urban migrant woman in China, went viral in a few hours. Fan was born in 1973 into a poor rural family from Xiangyang, Hubei province, and moved to Beijing in 1994. At first, she lived with her husband, a violent and alcoholic man who eventually left her and their two daughters. In the city, she became a domestic worker, attending to the daughter of a rich tycoon's concubine, far away from her daughters in Picun, an urban village in the outskirts of the capital. Today, she still does the same job, but for a different employer. In Picun, Fan came in contact with a literary group formed by other migrant workers interested in literature and writing, eventually becoming their best-known member and acting as the editor-in-chief of their self-published journal, *New Workers Literature* (新工人文学).

Although media attention eventually faded, her name has not been forgotten, especially among those interested in contemporary questions of inequality, labour, and working-class writing. While it is hard to find any study dedicated specifically to her work in Western academia (there has been some discussion, for instance in Guo 2017), research in China generally tends to focus on the 'media phenomenon' generated by her memoir and sudden celebrity. Scholarly articles that analyse her writing from a literary point of view are conspicuously fewer in number (for instance, see Li 2017 and Xi 2018). Yet, Fan's literary production is extremely interesting in terms of the provocative questions it raises regarding both migrant-worker/subaltern writing 'at large' and literature in general. For instance, as pointed out by Zhang Huiyu (2017), the surge of writing 'from below', of which Fan is a representative, breaks the tendency towards the professionalisation of literature, stressing the right to culture of individuals and groups belonging to subaltern classes.

Discussion outside academia has been livelier, including not a few attacks on Fan's work for its perceived low literary quality. Prejudice? It is hard to say. For sure, literature produced by migrant workers in China is often considered of high social significance but low aesthetic value (van Crevel 2017). It is ironic that such a critique also came from Yu Xiuhua, a female poet from rural China who has been ostracised herself for not being a specialist writer—indeed, Fan and Yu share a number of similarities, both having become 'self-made' literary sensations with a little help from the Internet. This, in turn, prompted another well-known poet, Wang Jiaxin, to respond with a passionate piece defending Fan from this unlikely critic and questioning the aesthetic sense from which we assess works of literature (Wang 2017).

Fan herself has rebuked some of the criticism directed against her, hinting at the aforementioned prejudice: 'People who read my piece said that it was actually written by Peking University people, that someone wanted to push an illiterate nanny into the temple of literature. I don't understand—is the temple of literature perhaps already full? And can't I enter it, unless someone pushes me in?' (Fan 2018c: 8). She has, however, refused any 'representative' status imposed on her (Fan 2018a) and has been quite elusive with journalists. When she did meet some, she later wrote a humorous piece explaining how it was actually her who interviewed them about the conditions of the urban youth (Fan 2018b).

The debate on the 'literariness' (文学性) of working-class writers, although undoubtedly relevant, risks turning sterile if our aesthetic is not contested. In other words, what is the criterion to measure the level of literariness of a work? Is it always valid, or even universal? Where is it positioned in the web of power and class relations in the cultural field? This is why I have chosen to use these pages to reflect on some elements that characterise Fan's writing, in order to contribute to a sketching out of the new subaltern autobiographical literature produced by her and others.

Life as a Book

'I Am Fan Yusu' opens with a fairly 'literary' *incipit*, orchestrated to reflect, first and foremost, the author's passion for literature: 'My life is like a book too hard to read, so clumsily has fate bound me.' These opening lines foreground the possibility for literature to become a book telling the tale(s) of subaltern lives, dragging them out of invisibility, but they also show Fan's attention to stylistic refinement. The book image recurs later in the story, in an encouragement to read (and write) despite the gloomy plot: 'A book never read by anyone is sad to see, like a person who has never lived decently.' Indeed, Fan, an avid reader since childhood, has a very pure idea of literature. According to her, good literature should not only speak of social ills but of the human soul, and she lists Calvino, Carver, Han Shaogong, and Kafka among her favourite writers precisely because she thinks they were successful in this respect (Fan 2019). This idea is reflected in her efforts at refining her story with metaphors, images, and stylistic devices to make a literary tale out of it, rather than a mere account of her life; in other words, to write not only a reportage, but 'true' literature. Her accomplishments in terms of narrative structure, register, and style have been praised, for example, by Qin Xiaoyu, the editor of *The Verse of Us* (我的诗篇), an anthology of migrant-worker poetry (Qin 2017).

Family is one of the first and central elements in Fan's work. In an earlier piece of writing, 'Peasant Big Brother' (农民大哥), she recalls her older brother's delusional efforts to become a famous writer and their family's deprivations to support him, offering a staggering insight into their poor living conditions (Fan 2016). Her father never meant much for her, and his presence was like 'the shadow of a big tree'. She and her mother, on the contrary, were very close: the latter is described as an 'exceptionally appreciable talent', having 'awe-inspiring prestige', and always standing by her oldest son even if his delusions were making

him into the joke of the village. In brief, the mother is the strongest person in Fan's rural family, sublimated as someone 'with a talent in speaking, who sounded like a state leader as soon as she opened her mouth' as a stark contrast to the stereotype of old, ignorant rural women (Fan 2017a). After her first trip out of the village when she was 12 (to 'walk barefoot to the end of the world'), Fan was branded as a bringer of shame merely for being a girl who dared to walk out of the house (whereas men's mobility was encouraged), but her mother continued to show her love. The mother's role is so central that, originally, the title of what then became 'I Am Fan Yusu' was supposed to be 'My Mother', before it was changed on the editor's suggestion (I am grateful to Paola Iovene and Zhang Huiyu for sharing this insight).

However, the stigma for breaking such an ossified gender rule continued to haunt Fan, and years later she was not allowed to stay in the village after she returned with her daughters on the run from her violent husband. Despite the persistence of motherly support, the rupture of patriarchal gender rules cast Fan out of her original family and became a sort of 'rite of passage' into the floating population for both her and her daughters. Their destiny of economic instability is thus represented exactly as the result of an intersectional oppression of class and gender relations. Fan acknowledges she has become 'a guest in the village that generated and nurtured [her]', and that her daughters are 'duckweed floating rootless in the water'.

Forced separation is what characterises their life in the city, a theme expanded on in her poem 'Domestic Worker' (家政女工; Fan 2017b), dedicated to the paradoxical and painful contradiction of having to rock someone else's baby to sleep while longing for her own. Her job is to feign 'happiness and cheerfulness'; however, in doing so, all she can think of are her own children: 'My daughters / to provide for you / I work as a nanny for city people / my daughters / are now orphans with a mother.' This poem is a picture of the material

and sentimental conditions of migrant families, capturing their social condition of inequality compared to wealthier city residents.

Fan's care for her own family broadens into care for other migrant children as well, in a sort of extended family. The second part of 'I Am Fan Yusu', which focuses on the author's urban life, expands on this theme. Fan's denunciation of the living conditions of migrant children includes two elements. The first is education: poverty and lack of an urban household registration force migrant children to attend unofficial, low-quality schools, outside of the ordinary education system. The second (and more essential) is family. Fan writes of her older daughter as quite educated and generally well-off, thanks to her relatively constant presence. Her situation is compared with that of other migrant children whose mothers are away, or whose parents' marriages are fragile or broken. They are left essentially unattended with no one to take care of them, and remain largely uneducated: 'Perhaps people like to divide into groups, just like animals also form flocks and packs. My daughter's two friends are like this. Their fate is indeed a most tragic one' (Fan 2017a). For Fan, this is the fate of social and moral degradation.

Fan's work, including and beyond 'I Am Fan Yusu', thus sounds like a modern cry to 'Save the children!' almost a century after Lu Xun (1981) wrote his 'A Madman's Diary' (狂人日记). However, while the children Lu Xun was addressing were facing the danger of falling victim to a 'cannibalistic' feudal society, today's (migrant) children risk being reduced to mere bodies for the workforce, deprived of agency and subjectivity: 'As no dear one would pray to the Heavens for them, they have become screws in the workshop of the world, terracotta warriors of the assembly line, living a marionette's life' (Fan 2017a). Not only is this passage very evocative, but it is also thought-provoking in its connection with another migrant author, as the image of workers as terracotta warriors can be found in a poem by Xu Lizhi (2015), a Foxconn worker whose suicide in 2014 won his poetry posthumous

fame (Pozzana 2019, 195; van Crevel 2019). This intertextual element suggests a certain degree of personal identification with the industrial army of migrant workers.

Class inequality in family relations is further represented in Fan's depiction of life in her employer's house, where she, a migrant woman, has to live separately from her children in order to take care of the baby of a tycoon and his young mistress, who humiliates herself living like 'a concubine in a palace drama'. Witnessing such a regressive gender and social practice where economically-dependent women act as second wives for rich men leaves her wondering 'whether I was living in the golden age of the Tang dynasty or in the Qing empire, rather than in socialist New China'.

Flowers of the Motherland

All these themes—left-behind children, family solidarity, social inequality—are present in an ardent poem written by Fan Yusu in October 2015, right after the case of a group suicide of young left-behind children in Bijie, Guizhou province (Xinhua 2015). In the poem, she successfully turns an individual case into an utterance of collective indignation, identifying herself with the plight of left-behind children, and, more generally, with the condition of migrant workers: 'Child, I and your mother have an identical name, / we are called rural migrants / you have a name to share with rural migrant children: "left-behind child" / my children have a name to share with rural migrant children too: "floating children"' (Fan 2015).

Using the vocabulary of social science and journalism, Fan proudly takes on the term 'rural migrant' (农民工). This is not a predictable move, since some, even in Picun, openly refuse such a word as derogatory, preferring terms like 'new workers' (新工人) instead (Huang 2016). Fan, on the contrary, reappropriates the stigmatising term—

described as 'a discriminating label' later in the poem—and uses it to forge a collective identity for migrant families within the unequal social space of the city. This is powerfully expressed in these verses: 'Beijing is big, so big, / it can find room for a hundred hollow villas for county magistrates / Beijing is small, so small, / it cannot find room for one single school desk for a migrant child.'

What Fan asks in the ending verses of the poem is social recognition for migrant children as peers to all other children in/of China, granting them the right to be part of the society they feel excluded from: 'In the next life / all mothers' children / will not be called "left-behind children", / will not be called "floating children", / they will all be called / with the name Grandpa Mao (毛爷爷) chose for them / 60 years ago, / flowers of the motherland' (needless to say, 'Grandpa Mao' refers to Mao Zedong). The aforementioned collective identity is diluted in a broader national dimension where social differences are levelled by the common belonging to the same national community, conjured up with the explicit references to the motherland (祖国), as well as to its socialist history. Fan's cry to 'Save the (migrant) children!' is couched in hope for the motherland itself to hear the cry and take back the children it appears to have forgotten. In other words, it is a cry for social recognition, a demand to be acknowledged as integral parts of the country, and, more specifically, of the city; a request that remains unattainable as long as such subjects remain socially and culturally silenced.

A Proletarian Nora

Another provoking, and slightly daring, literary parallel can be drawn. In Henrik Ibsen's famous play *A Doll's House*, the female protagonist Nora eventually breaks with the dominant patriarchal family system and walks out of the house where she served as a wife and a mother. In his sharp critique of the play, Lu

Xun aptly remarked: ‘Nora really has only two options: to fall into degradation or to return home’ (2017, 257). His argument was actually quite progressive, as it highlighted how women could not hope for real emancipation without obtaining equal economic rights, which is no less true today than it was in the nineteenth century. However, similar to how Zheng Xiaoqiong, one of the most accomplished migrant-worker poets, describes the women workers she poetically narrates (Zheng 2012), Fan Yusu is a ‘Nora’ who has neither returned home nor fallen into degradation, but is trying to find her own path against all the odds. This proletarian Nora, alongside many others, picks up the story narrated by Ibsen (and Lu Xun) right where they left off.

Family and literature are two key elements that can allow these legions of proletarian, floating ‘Noras’ (and their children) to survive, according to Fan. What can be deduced from her work is a particular kind of subaltern consciousness, typical of her (our) time, centred on family rather than class. This undoubtedly has much to do with Fan’s own life experience: the ‘matrilineal’ line of support from mother to daughter (her mother–herself–her daughters) that we find in her story is a response to the intersection of gender and class oppression that underpins her hardships. It is likewise beyond doubt that her attention to children, subaltern of the subaltern, comes from Fan’s own personal sensibility. However, as we have seen, there is also a wider dimension at play. Family in the urban context reemerges as a space for mutual solidarity as well, since sharing the same social conditions implies the possibility of passing family-like love and empathy on to others outside the household. This suggests that it is possible to effectively build a sort of solidarity network: ‘On the streets of Beijing, I hug every deformed wanderer, every sufferer from mental illnesses. I use my hugs to pass on motherly love, to return motherly love’ (Fan 2017a). Indeed, this kind of solidarity for Fan stems precisely from the question ‘What can I do for my mother?’, posed in an earlier passage.

Through this idea of solidarity and of the agents able to effect it, we get a sense of Fan’s ‘subaltern consciousness’, significantly different (but no less collective) from what we would traditionally consider as class consciousness. In point of fact, however, this is not surprising. In a context marked by a general depoliticisation of society (Wang 2006), the unending search for a collective space of solidarity needs to find new solutions. Under such circumstances, further complicated by the absence of an inclusive welfare system, what steps in is the household, traditionally the provider of solidarity and institution for social reproduction in rural China.

Furthermore, Fan Yusu, alongside other female members of the Picun literature group, lead much-exploited domestic workers, generally invisible in the urban order, to enter as a whole social group into the ‘temple of literature’ (which is apparently not quite full yet). Indeed, Fan’s choice of the autobiographical genre should make us read her memoir as a tale bespeaking not only of individual hopes and motives, but also as an invaluable insight into the subjective conditions of such a social group. This provides some food for thought as we strive to grasp the multiplicity and complexity of what can be called subaltern writing today. It also shines some light on the new Chinese working class, in all its fluidity and diversity, following what the Italian worker-turned-sociologist Aris Accornero described as the transition from twentieth-century ‘Labour’ to the mosaic of today’s ‘labours’ (Accornero 2000). This form of subaltern autobiographical writing should be approached with an open mind, addressing the sociocultural questions it advances and the challenges it poses to the dominant conception of aesthetics.

Now the question is: can and will ‘Noras’ become ‘Lu Xuns’? ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 1, 2020*,
edited by Ivan Franceschini, Nicholas Loubere and Christian Sorace, published 2020
by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.01.2020.15