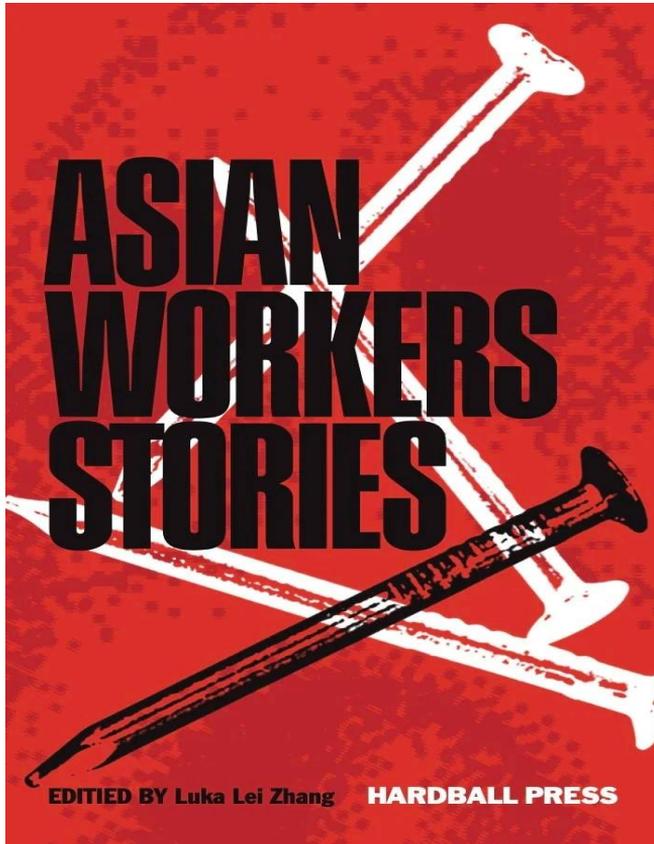


Luka Lei Zhang (ed.), *Asian Workers Stories*. Hardball Press, 2024, pp. 177. ISBN: 979-8-9898025-3-1



Luka Lei Zhang’s anthology of Asian worker’s writings is a valuable and helpful contribution to the fledgling but steadily developing field of Asian worker writing. Zhang has gathered and translated texts old and new from Bangladesh, China, Laos, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, with stories set in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, the Burmese border, China, and Laos. As Zhang remarks in her ‘Editor’s Note’, these fifteen writers’ “remarkable talent and unwavering commitment have enriched the working-class literary landscape, leaving an indelible mark on the collective narrative of the region.” (‘Editor’s Note’). In several of these narratives, not only are hardships documented, but also strategies to finally escape such hardships through collective support and mutual trust and cooperation are imagined and ultimately chosen. While earlier generations of worker-writers included in this collection published covertly, distant from the

mainstream, younger writers engage with both social and literary communities in China, Singapore and across Asia. They “demonstrate new and divergent paths a worker writer can pursue.” (Editor’s Note).

Zhang’s anthology falls into two sections: first, ten pieces of fiction, then a significantly shorter nonfiction section comprising of five non-fiction accounts. A sustained piece, from Bangladeshi writer, Hamiruddin Middy, (‘The Grave’) provides a deftly written portrait of village life in West Bengal in dynamic detail as villagers puzzle over the conundrum of an unidentified grave on a sandbar of the nearby river. News and agitation spreads to and through local TV crews and journalists, whipping up the multitude’s alarm. Even though the village imam is respected and maintains an organically ordered village society, blame and mass rage falls on an elusive supposedly mentally ill man existing at the cusp of civilisation and the natural world. “Find him! Find the bastard! If we find him, we’ll break his head today!” (15). The body in the grave causing all this commotion ultimately turns out to be that of a humble bird.

In a note to Laotian author Wiset Sanmano’s story ‘Thongphun’s Prestigious Path’, we are informed that the story’s translator wishes to remain anonymous, possibly underlining how many of the stories may touch on politically as well as commercially sensitive topics. Thongphun, the story’s narrator, a successful local boxer returning home after a long absence, notes that the area is much changed. As he arrives, workers flood the streets, protesting. There are tensions over low pay and (from the locals’ point of view) unwelcome migrant workers from nearby Burma. In a sadly familiar scenario, migrants receive an increasingly lowered wage for jobs that local citizens are not willing to do. In addition, because of the Burmese workers’ fear of being deported employers are emboldened into badly treating the workers. But the employers take things too far and the Burmese workers won’t stand for it anymore. Thus, strikes and protest emerge – even the most exploited have power in numbers, and among the younger Burmese workers that power is significantly enhanced by a better education. The story of the protesting Burmese workers becomes a tale within a tale told by ‘grandmother’ the voice of authentic local experience and eye-witness recounter, relating all to the narrator, who just so happens to model sportswear manufactured by the company the protestors work for. Officials disperse the protesting workers, company goons beat them with batons and rip up their banners. Amidst the protest, Thongphun has an epiphany, recognising the comparatively huge amount he’s paid for merely posing in items produced by the brand whose names are on the ripped-up placards, compared to the sparse wages of the real workers: the makers of these garments. The experience disabuses Thongphun of his former pride in the company. The copious blood of

the workers spilt on the road causes the boxer to cry. In Part 2 of the same story, set back in Bangkok, Thongphun's disillusionment with the sports company complicit in exploitation of Burmese workers is aggravated by news reports which tell a very different story about the protest from what he's just witnessed,

The news about the mob in Maesot appeared in the newspaper, but the report did not match with what Thongpun really witnessed. According to this, there was neither a confrontation, nor any casualties. Unless he had seen it himself, Thongphut thought, he would have believed what the article was saying. (24)

Thus, a complicity becomes apparent between national and local media and an oppressive and greedy company bent on making the company look good, while glossing and silencing their workers. The laughter of the clothing boss as he talks of increasing profits for the company while pronouncing the protesting workers as deserving of a beating, galvanises Thongphun into hijacking his own live TV spot and undeterredly highlighting the company's atrocious treatment of the Burmese employees, and thereby, "[c]ontribut[ing] something back to humanity" (25). Samano's story ends with Thongphun going back to Maesot to stand side by side with the workers "even though he doubted his ability to help anyone" (25).

While Rolinda Espanola is well known as a migrant worker poet in Singapore, 'The kind of Home & New Year in the Air', comprises of two stories. In 'The Kind of Home', while the narrator can't be home in person she sends material love to her family, whether Nutella, Pringles crisps, chocolates and stuffed toys - imagining herself home through the gifts sent home. She also sends her running shoes home - as her new ma'am in Singapore says she is not allowed to run. "Me and my madam had a discussion." (61) With that domestic edict comes the revelation that a domestic worker cannot be herself in Singapore, an employer's family home cannot be her home. Rather it is a prison. The situation is not helped by Singapore's intransigent-institutional use of the hierarchical-derogatory word "maid". The narrator concludes, "here my voice is Blu-blu-blu-blurred." (62). The poem within this story, presumably to her daughter comes as a tug on this reader's heartstrings. In 'New Year in the air', a domestic worker - immediately after New Year celebrations, leaves her family in the Philippines for a new Singapore job. Hugs are sadly not enough if the protagonist is to get her daughter into a fee-paying school affording better life opportunities. Repeatedly in this collection, we encounter parents making many a significant "sacrifice" for their children, in the hope of lifting them out of a vicious cycle of poverty (65).

Over a decade ago, Md Mukul Hossine became the first migrant poet published in Singapore. In his story, 'Ship Phobia', workers' isolation, misery and

panic are represented vividly, poignantly in prose - but also given a fresh perspective, as the narrator, a volunteer helping to man a helpline for migrant workers, tries to calm a worker panicking at the prospect of having to spend the night on a docked container ship. All is seemingly in the hands of the Ministry of Manpower - but slight barely noticed human tweaks of rigid public protocol abetted by a migrant volunteer and security guard ultimately make life for the worried worker far from unbearable. In Indonesian writer, Indah Yosevina's 'A Tinge of Ferris Wheel', we encounter tales of Indonesian domestic workers permanently traumatised by experiencing torture, maltreatment, cruelty and no money in Saudi Arabia, 'the land of the ka'aba' (74). The whole experience is exacerbated by corrupt, uncaring and cruel agents in Indonesia and Singapore. A letter dropped from an upper apartment "detailing a story of torture" of a fellow helper imploring the Indonesian embassy's assistance, falls at Ningsih's feet, but she is powerless to help the imprisoned fellow domestic worker. After two years of daily physical and mental abuse, Ningsih herself is finally allowed to go home, but with no pay: "To this day, Ningsih hasn't received the money" (74).

Shengzi in 'Notes from the Factory,' written in the 2010s in diary form observes that "It is in the factory workshop where individuals become deformed. Once you're here, you're like a balloon that can be twisted into unusual shapes" ('Entry 2', p 96). She describes a brutalist, industrial landscape in which "the sound of steel drains the spirit" (97). At the same time, there is a human playfulness and lyricism to the writing. Workers work more happily when bosses are absent. There is also a critique of unions neutralised during this era of enhanced aggressive global capitalism – pertinent to other Asian countries and governments: "The core function of trade unions has been emasculated, and I'm afraid they can only be called "eunuch" organisations. What is the relationship between trade-unions and workers?" (98).

In conclusion, Zhang's anthology's varied representations through narratives portraying simultaneously the economic role and exploitation of workers at home and abroad across Asia makes for a welcome addition to contemporary labouring class writing locally and globally. Zhang's hope that the collection will foster connections, encourage solidarity, and be an empowering source for both readers and writers seems well-founded. The collection is an important step in generating more nuanced representations of the lives and struggles of workers globally. It extends our knowledge and understanding of contemporary worker writing, as well as opening myriad new paths for further research and study. Ultimately, "Asian Workers Stories" is a powerful testament to the sheer resilience and determination of migrant workers. In addition, the

anthology illuminates dark recesses of exploitation and hardship and foregrounds the struggles and triumphs of migrant workers. As Mengyu notes,

Things are gradually changing. The journey of dagong [migrant manual worker] is rough and dying, but also full of joy and excitement; it makes me feel that everything is leading somewhere, and there is a never-ending drive to push me on....” (94)

This sense of hope and resilience is a testament to the power of storytelling and the importance of amplifying the voices of worker-writers. As each story is connected to unique, complementarily rich social and political contexts, *Asian Workers Stories* may also act as an incentive for scholars and researchers to proactively explore further specific examples of these writings, contexts for themselves. The copious, intense writings of Stefani J Alvarez and other writers represented here will hopefully be translated into English in the near future – bringing the lives, injustices and triumphs workers experience into even greater illuminating focus.

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