



LEAVE YOUR NOTEBOOKS, BUT YOU CAN'T LEAVE THE FACTORY

In September 2017, I performed the inefficacious feat of travelling over 1,000 kilometres from Hong Kong to Wuhan, a large urban metropolis in the centre of China, to oversee the printing of a new publication.

During the course of approximately one week in Wuhan, more intercity travels ensued, as a trail of outsourcings led me from one large factory to smaller ones, from suburb to industrial zone, and in the end—at 11:00 pm in one grimy workshop not much larger than a garage—with a single worker.

The others had been clocking out one-by-one from 8 o'clock as they finished their tasks for the day, and the industrial roar of this gated block of wholesale paper vendors and print-related workshops quieted down in turn as their respective machines were powered off. I was still there because our small print run of 500 books had been finished off poorly. Some were graced with Pollock-like splashes of glue drying slowly on their covers, others disco-cut into parallelograms rather than rectilinear shapes, with the covers bound to the pages at strange angles.

Having already outsourced myself to Wuhan after sadly having to say no to the triple-price of printing locally in Hong Kong, I knew that I could not expect a perfect production, yet these results were somehow boundary-breaking in a stunning way. As I was frantically messaging back and forth with the boss, whom had not been present all day, it slowly dawned upon me that the primary overtime job of this one remaining factory employee, whom the others had called Fatty, was to keep me from leaving the premises until I paid the remaining amount of money owed.

After twelve hours crouched over books at Wang Jie Binding Factory, a final resignation and sympathy for Fatty, the singular labourer who had to suffer in this dispute while the boss was probably sprawled out at home in front of his television, led me to handing over the cash and finally going home. Maybe it was my own weariness or maybe it was a bit of Stockholm Syndrome, but actually, Fatty, whose real name is WANG Zuyu, and I somehow became friends that night. The following is a transcript of our WeChat messenger conversation in the evening after we parted.

photo // 王祖裕 WANG Zuyu

Elaine W. H0: Thank you for your help today. I really hope you'll get the opportunity to go back to Shenzhen one day!

WANG Zuyu: You're welcome.

WZY: So it turns out you are an artist. 🤔🤔🤔

EWH: 🤔

Artists can't get involved with printing?

WZY: That's not what I mean

EWH: Just joking. haha

WZY: I read what you wrote about the *Black Rim* publication, the writing doesn't seem like you.

艺术家何颖雅接受99艺术网记者采访
EWH: How does it not seem like me?

WZY: Not careful for one second, and now I've run into an artist, feels a bit shameful. 😊

EWH: Huh?!

Why would you be ashamed?

You are the only reason why I didn't stay longer making a fuss with the boss today.

WZY: I was really curious what you are actually doing, and it wasn't until just now that I had a look at your WeChat "Moments" postings and searched online that I realised what you are doing



EWH: Hahahaha



WZY: Artist + Bookseller + Slow Courier + Performance Art + Social Practice + ...

Too much all over the place

EWH: Hahahahaha

I think so, too

WZY: Actually, I think you'd be most suited as a freelance writer

Your writing is not bad, and your English not bad either

EWH: You've only known me for a few hours and you can already see what I would be most suited to do???

WZY: Just a personal feeling

EWH: Okay then

I do like to write but don't have so many opportunities to do so.

WZY: You can write whenever there's time, it's not necessary to publish everything.

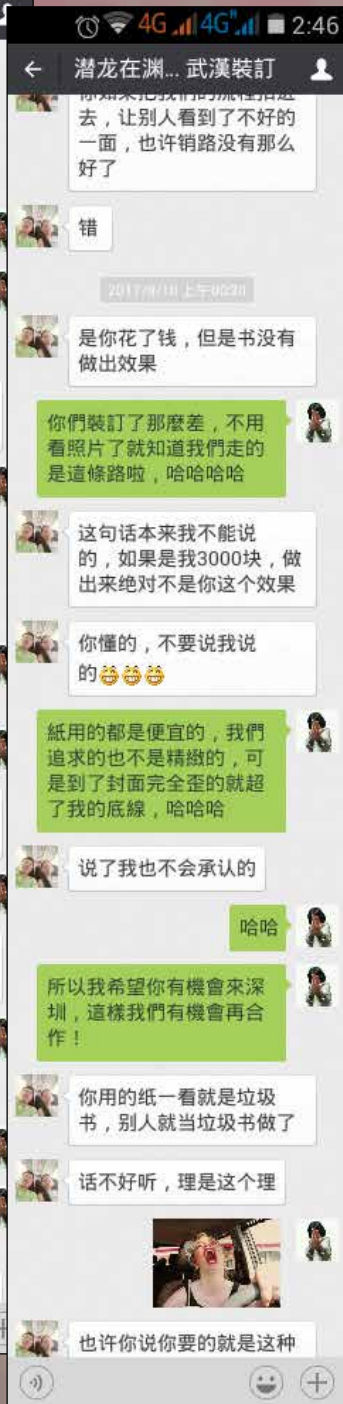
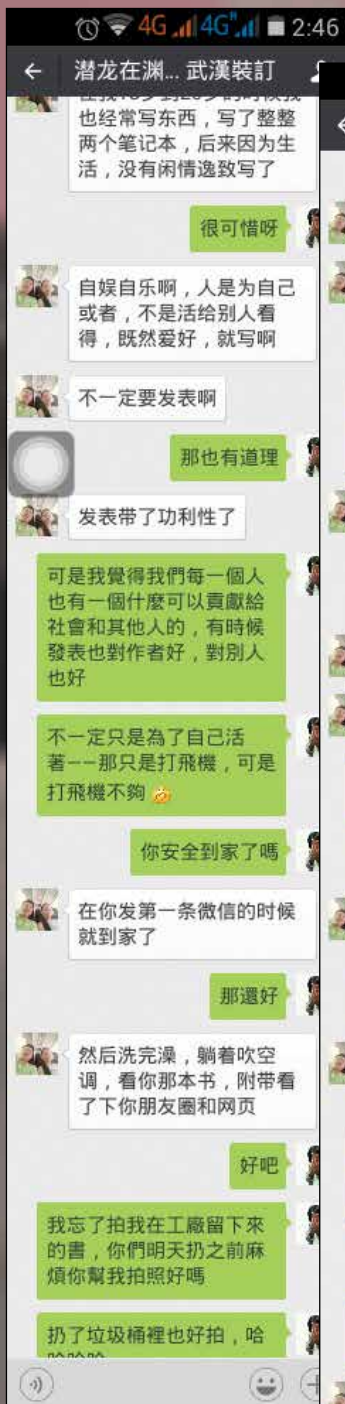
EWH: What do you do with it if you don't publish?

WZY: When I was between 18 and 20 years old, I also often wrote. I filled up two whole notebooks, but later because of the goings-on of life, I didn't have the free time and mood to write anymore.

EWH: That's really a pity.

WZY: It was just something for my own amusement. Just as people live for themselves, not for showing their lives to other people. It was a hobby, and I just wrote. You don't have to publish.

EWH: You have a point there



WZY: The need to publish becomes a kind of personal gain

EWH: But I think each person has something to contribute to society and others. Sometimes publishing is not only for oneself but also something positive for others

It's not only for ourselves that we live, that would just be masturbation, but jerking off is obviously not enough 🙄

Have you reached home safely?

WZY: I had already arrived when you wrote the first message

EWH: Oh, that's good

WZY: And then I took a shower, layed down and relaxed under the air conditioner, looked through a copy of your book that I brought back with me, your "Moments" and website

EWH: Okay

I forgot to take a photo of the books I left at the factory, could you take a photo for me tomorrow morning before they throw them away?

It will also look good thrown in the rubbish bin, *hahahaha*

WZY: Sure

Why do you want to take a picture of that for?

EWH: For documentation.

Originally I had wanted to photograph the entire process, but today when I arrived at the factory you all had already finished everything

WZY: You want to document that, too? Like you sifting through the books all day?

EWH: I wanted to document the binding process

WZY: That would only make you disappointed

We are only a small workshop

EWH: Not at all, I've accepted what you said was "the Wuhan way"

Small workshops are good, but if—

WZY: These under the table things just degrade your book

EWH: Our book doesn't have anything to do with level or class

WZY: I browsed though the book, mostly it's introducing independent publications

EWH: I like to work with small workshops. Our labour is still strongly related to personal relations and human sentiment.

Big companies don't have anymore of that.

The problem is that this small workshop of yours looks down on a small job like ours.

WZY: If you had documented the whole process and let people seen this ugly side of things, it would probably negatively effect your sales

Wrong [about us looking down].

It's you who spent the money, but the book didn't come out as it should.

EWH: You all did the binding so badly, nobody would need to see documentation photos and they'd know we did it this cheap way, *hahahaha*

WZY: I wouldn't ordinarily be able to say this, but if it was 3,000 *yuan* for a job that I was in charge of, for

sure it wouldn't have turned out like this.

You know what I mean, don't tell anyone I said it 😏😏😏

EW: The paper we used is really cheap, we weren't looking for some kind of fine-grade result, but when it got to the binding part it really went beyond my lowest expectations, hahaha

WZY: Even if you told my boss I wouldn't admit it

EW: Haha

So that's why I hope you get a chance to come to Shenzhen, then we'd have a chance to work together again!

WZY: You can tell at a glance that the paper you used is trash, so other people will treat it like trash.

This doesn't sound nice, but it's the truth.

EW:

WZY: Maybe you wanted this kind of result

EW: LMAO

So what you're saying is that people have treated us based upon their judgement of our outer appearance

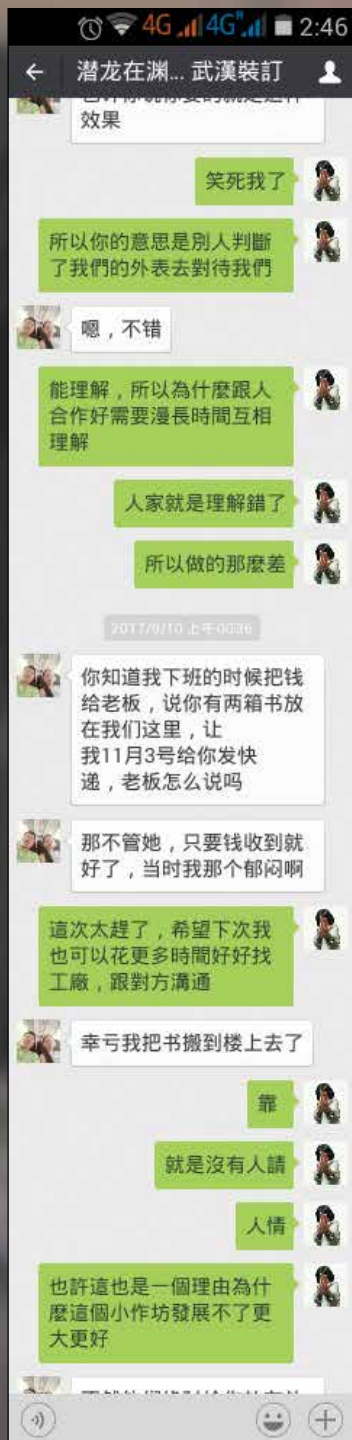
WZY: Yes, that's it

EW: I can understand that, and that's why it actually takes a long time to understand one another in order to collaborate together well

Because obviously we've been misunderstood

So they did a terrible job.

WZY: You know when I got off work and gave your money to the boss, I told him that you left two boxes with us and asked us to courier it to you in November. You know what he said?



WZY: "Don't worry about her then, as long as you got the money then it's done." It made me really depressed.

EWH: This time everything was too rushed, I hope that next time I can spend more time to find a good factory and communicate better

WZY: Thank goodness I stored the books upstairs.

EWH: WTF

Really no feeling.

This is probably a reason why his little workshop hasn't been able to develop further or expand.

WZY: Because for sure they would have otherwise just left your books outside even if they get rained on or scorched in the sun. Then after two months' time you'd really get the final result you wanted: that mouldy and aged look.

EWH: I'm tearing up here

WZY: It always rains here, so if books are left here for a period of time they take in the moisture, that's why I moved the books upstairs for you.

This is the real meaning behind that English phrase of yours which I just posted onto my "Moments" page and tagged you

EWH:

跪跪跪



WZY: Don't worry about your books, you can count on me

EWH: I haven't seen your "Moments" posts yet, haha

Hahahaha

See it now.

WZY: People from Wuhan really don't have any sense of responsibility, not really any kind of refinement, just fighting against one another. Thinking about Wuhan life already makes me exhausted.

EWH: Ayy...

Sounds really tough.

Tragic.

WZY: Dealing with them even makes me tired. Your books clearly could be done well, they still had to make a big mess of it.

EWH: Well, I know it now...

WZY: All the work you did to prepare was probably as perfect as you could get, but then down to the last step he had to screw it all up, so basically all the work you did before is pretty much a waste.

When I first came to Wuhan I worked as a factory manager for three years. But I couldn't go on with that anymore, I've had enough with managing, it just gives me pain. I just want to be a simple labourer.

EWH: Why?

WZY: Wuhan people are too lazy

"To open a shop is easy, to keep it open is an art"

取消 评论

1

EW: But can't you earn more money being a factory manager?

that for your whole life, right?

WZY: It's totally different here compared to Shenzhen

WZY: I couldn't make it [as factory manager] in Guangdong. The factories over there are bigger and my skills are limited

EW: Oh

WZY: In Shenzhen, efficiency and quality are top priorities.

In Wuhan, a factory manager only makes 500 yuan more than a skilled worker.

It's bare bones.

EW: What are your limitations?

WZY: Even if I can't go on like this my whole life, what other choice do I have? For now I can only go on like this.

If I tell you about my family background, you'd understand.

EW: Goodness! 🤔

WZY: Unbelievable, huh?

EW: Yeah

WZY: For example, now I work as a skilled labourer, with a minimum salary of 5,500 a month. Overtime gets 25 an hour, and rent, electricity/water bills and meals are all covered by the boss. If you go to another factory and work as a manager, you'd only get 6-7,000 a month, and you'd have to pay for all your expenses yourself.

So now my boss covers pretty much everything. Every month I only have to spend for cigarettes and topping up my phone.

Wuhan is really shocking, eh?

EW: Your rent is also paid for by the boss?

WZY: Yes

EW: Would it be better to be a factory manager in Shenzhen?

WZY: The washing machine and fridge and everything all belong to the boss.

He covers utilities, too.

EW: Wow

But you can't keep on like

EW:



Are you from a farming family?

WZY: My family come from the countryside. I was the only one in our whole village that even went to middle school, and I had to work part-time to pay for it.

EW: You are quite special then

WZY: That year our school had over 3,000 students, and I was one of the top three.

EW: Wow

WZY: But I couldn't afford to go to high school.

So later I went to Shenzhen, ended up staying there over ten years.

Came back to Wuhan in 2013 completely broke.

EW: Were you happy during those years?

潜龙在渊... 武漢裝訂



不然他们绝对给你放在外面风吹日晒的，等两个月后书肯定达到你要的效果了，发霉变旧了

哭了



我们这里老是下雨，书放这里时间长了就受潮了，所以我才给你搬楼上去了



这就是我才发在朋友圈里转自你的那句英文的意思



不要担心你的书，我做事，你放心

我还没看你的朋友圈呢，哈哈

哈哈哈哈哈

看到了



武汉人真的没有责任心，没有什么素质，勾心斗角的，活着都累

2017/9/10 上午09:44

哇

聽起來很慘

悲劇



我跟他们一起做事我都觉得累，明明可以干的好的的一件事，非给你干的乱七

4G 4G 2:46

潜龙在渊... 武漢裝訂

八糟

現在知道了



你在前面把准备工作做的堪称完美了，他能到最后临门一脚给你做的一塌糊涂，你前面做的努力都白费了



我刚来武汉给人家做厂长，做了三年，我不做了，我就只干活，不管事了，心累

为啥



武汉这边的人太懒散

廠長不是能賺更好的錢嗎



跟深圳那边完全不是一个概念

哦



深圳的品质和效率是放在第一位的



在武汉厂长只比我做技术工多500块钱



鸡肋

天啊



不可想象？

2017/9/10 上午09:54

是呀

4G 4G 2:46

潜龙在渊... 武漢裝訂



打比方，我现在做技术工，底薪5500，加班25/H，房租水电，吃饭喝水什么的，全是老板的，你在别的厂做个厂长，也就六七千封顶了，开支还全部是自己的



我每个月除了抽烟，充话费意外，其他开支基本都是老板的



被武汉吓到了吧



房租也是老闆給的？



嗯



在深圳的話，做廠長會好一點嗎



洗衣机冰箱都是老板的



水电也是他的

天啊



可是你那樣不能一輩子吧



广东那边的厂大一些，我能力有限，做不下来



你能力有什麼限度



不能一辈子又能怎么样呢，目前只能是这样的



说一下我的家庭背景你就明白了



WZY: Not happy

EWB: *Oh*

You always make it sound
like Shenzhen is better,
I thought you liked it.

WZY: I do like it.

But all the money I made
got spent in Shenzhen, too.

After moving to Shenzhen,
I stayed for four years
before ever going back
home to visit. And in
total I stayed there for
seven years.

EWB: You couldn't save any of
the money you earned there?

WZY: I just got married last
year during Spring
Festival. Actually I met
my wife here.

EWB: So you will have to think
about making better conditions
for your family, too, then.

WZY: I'm 33 now, not so young
anymore

EWB: That's still young

WZY: I spent everything when I
was single in Shenzhen,
didn't start to save money
until coming back to
Wuhan. Last year we built
a three-storey house in
my wife's hometown and
spent everything. I still
owe more than 70,000, so
this year the plan is to
continue working for a year
in order to repay the debt
before thinking about doing
something else. My wife is
pregnant, too.

EWB: What other plans do you have?

WZY: I don't know.

My ex-girlfriend had
wanted me to become a web
programmer, but later she

went to Hong Kong and the
idea was shelved.

EWB: Are you interested in
programming? Good at it?

WZY: Actually I have no idea
what web programmers do.

EWB: *Hahaha*

WZY: I just like to tinker
with computers.

EWB: You've been working in
printing for so many years,
you must be pretty good
with it. You shouldn't
waste all your knowledge
and experience, you just
need to find a better
factory.

WZY: Don't you think that
I'm already completely
trapped here?

EWB: I have a friend from
Wuhan who also is also
in publishing, I can ask
for you.

Maybe you are, but Wuhan
must surely also have
other [possibilities].

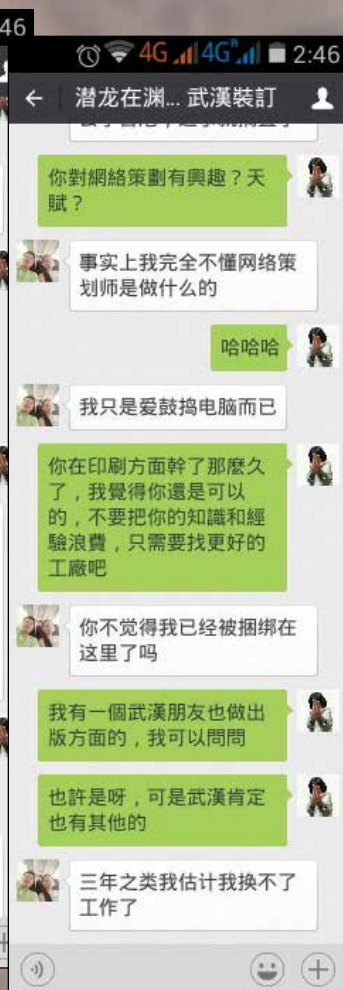
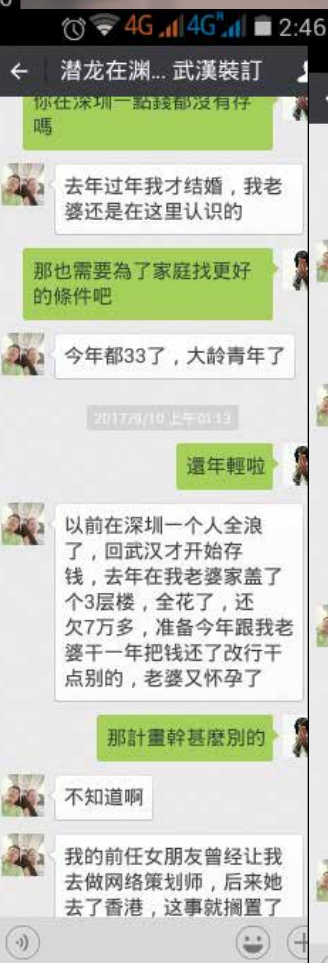
WZY: I think that I won't be
able to change jobs for at
least another three years.

EWB: A different company,
with other people.

For sure you can,
you're just at a bit
of a disadvantage right
now, that's all.

WZY: The boss is a relative of
mine, I've already tried to
leave several times, but in
the end it never works.

EWB: What I mean is that you
don't necessarily have
to leave Wuhan, but maybe
you can find somewhere
better in Wuhan.



WZY: Yeah

EWZ: They can't all be as bad as you say.

WZY: I want to go to Shenzhen, but my wife won't allow it.

EWZ: Understandable, it is a bit far. Hard to say.

WZY: I want to leave here, but my sister-in-law and mother-in-law won't let me.

EWZ: But you surely can find something better in Wuhan.



EWB: I have to get ready for bed, sorry...

Tomorrow morning I have an early plane to catch

WZY: Yeah, it's about my bedtime, too

EWB: You have to work early in the morning, too.

Thank you

WZY: Good night!

EWB: Good night.

