

CREATIVE SUBMISSION

To My City

Urbanisation and Industrialisation in Contemporary China

SHUHUA CHEN



Sewage from a spray-painting factory pouring into a river in Shantou.

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It was the second day of the workshop, *Writing the Body in the City: Anthropological Creative Writing*. We were reading aloud the assignments we had prepared on the relation between body and place. We ‘wrote places’ and we ‘talked to places’. Here is a piece in which I talked to my city, Shantou, in southeast China.

Good afternoon my city,

How are you? You are growing taller and taller, with high-rises, with factory chimneys. You are expanding further and further, reaching to your nearby villages. You are changing faster and faster, all in the name of ‘urbanisation’ along with your other title: ‘industrialisation’.

I stand still, inside your body. I feel your breath.

A breeze drifts across the river—not fresh, but unpleasant. No bird-songs. Rather, I am embraced by the hum of invisible machines. Hundreds of small factories enclose a little square of farmland. Standing by the river next to a piece of ‘preserved’ farmland, I am witnessing the fuming black smoke from the factory and its sewage pouring into the river. The polluted air, impervious to sunlight, incorporates my body into your changing landscape. As the arable land is no longer farmed but shaped into factories, so too are the wind and the light ‘industrialised’. I wonder if the landscape is, as the Irish poet, John O’Donohue puts it, ‘an ancient and silent form of consciousness’ for which ‘rivers and streams offer voice’ (1997: 115-116)? If so, then the invasion of industry obscures our awareness of you and silences the voice of your rivers and streams. A poster next to me keeps reminding me that this is a ‘Farmland Protection Zone’. Is this the only piece of farmland that retains your original identity, your history, your ancient consciousness?

I walk, moving within your body. I feel your inner heat.

I walk, so I touch, listen, smell, look, breathe, move, think, learn, and imagine. My feeling of walking along busy roads is like that of a tiny fish swimming slowly among swiftly moving sharks. The speed of the vehicles causes me to feel as if I could be swallowed up by them at any moment. With the busy traffic, noise, pollution, and crowds, I feel your heat welling up from within. But the feeling is not just from walking in particular. You, too, are running like a fast-spinning

washing machine, and we are the individuals who tumble within. How can we escape from your unceasing motion? You are working so hard, filling yourself with day-shifts and night-shifts. Migrant workers move from one factory to another, looking for full-time working hours: three working shifts per day, from 7:30 am until 10:30 pm, 30 days per month with only one day off. Factory owners claim that missing time means missing the market. An order for the Christmas market from Europe may require all of the migrant workers in a toy factory to work overnight for almost a whole week, with double-pay. Even the local elders are giving up their enjoyment of the sunshine and knitting: they too are now assembling toys products for wages. 'Hurry up' seems to be the phrase everyone here inside you repeats to themselves: high-speed transportation, fast food, instant amusement, and blitz marriages – these are just some of the 'gifts' you offer us. People rush through life in search of various kinds of 'immediate gratification', heating up your body—your industrialising body, your urbanising body.

Night falls, dimming your stage...

I step out of you, wondering about your future. What 'post-industrial' image will you have? I have no answer.

I wish you the best. I really do.

REFERENCES

O'Donohue, J. (1997) *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*. London, New York, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Bantam books.