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## The Named and the Unnamed: On Wang Ping's *Ten Thousand Waves*

*Ten Thousand Waves*, by Wang Ping. San Antonio: Wings Press, 2014.

*Ten Thousand Waves*, Wang Ping's third volume of poetry, is that rare thing: Art which goes beyond echoing the zeitgeist and becomes part of the dialogue. Avoiding the 'shelf life' of art which merely holds up the mirror and refrains from comment, Wang places her very specific social observations in tight perspective. Her journalistic approach illuminates her subjects, directly and honestly. It is the personal and anecdotal which we remember, the qualitative; not the quantitative facts and figures. This approach may appear quaint and entertaining in its immediate simplicity, yet complexity, like the bulk of the iceberg, lies just below the surface.

Divided into three parts, *Bargain*, *The Price of a Finger*, and *Crossing the Line*, the arrangement of these poems creates a path we recognize, but which still surprises at each curve and intersection. *Bargain* focuses on the poverty—and the solutions to that poverty—of the author's China. Her travels and experiences, her observations and subsequent epiphanies related to a world economy that creates such inequality. In *The Price of a Finger*, she transcribes the words of the workers and credits each individual with name and place. This second section also contains a fascinating passage placing the workers plight in relation to forgotten contemporary Chinese poets. The five poems in *Crossing the Line* delineate the often abject reality of the "immigrant experience." Taken together, the poems of *Ten Thousand Waves* graciously illuminate the experiences of a Chinese expatriate.

### *Bargain*: The Admission of Complicity

*Bargain* begins with a voice describing the mining of "rare earth" elements that are essential components of a plethora of contemporary electronic devices. The country's rise as the leader in world production skyrocketed in the past two decades; safety regulations and environmental impact concerns have not kept pace. This focus on health

issues underpins the poems of this section; for example, in "A Hakka Man Farms Rare Earths in South China" she writes,

Deep craters in the fields, blood and pus  
In streams and rivers . . . all because the world  
Wants this earth—"Vitamins" for I-pods  
Plasma TVs, wind turbines, guided missiles—  
Things that make the world  
Cleaner and more beautiful, as they say

And here we are, in the waist-deep sludge  
A sac of mud—a tail of greed  
Leaching in our stove.

While Wang adopts the voices of the overlooked or dispossessed, her own voice is always present. In "Bargain," "Young Monk at Debating Court," "Paradise," and "The Collector" the author speaks from immediate and personal experience. Her perception is complimented by her honesty. In "Bargain" a street vendor asks for ten yuan (less than two American dollars); the author haggles, walks away, settles on nine yuan:

She chases, thrusts the shoes into my hands.  
"You won, Miss. Take them for nine.  
What's nine yuan to you, a dollar twenty cents?  
And what's a yuan, less than a dime?  
Would you even bother to pick it up from the street?"  
I put away my victory in a trunk,  
never give it a second thought  
until I'm pulled out of the line  
at Minneapolis custom, maggot fingers  
prodding socks, underwear, wrapped gifts,  
and there it is—my bargain  
red and loud like thunderclaps:  
"You saved a dime, fool,  
but lost your soul."

The personal revelation, the unasked-for epiphany. Economic disparity takes many forms; an admission of complicity is the first step toward rectifying that complicity and seeking solutions.

Loss and the Near Future: *The Price of a Finger*

A footnote to part two, *The Price of a Finger*, shows a graph from the Zhejiang Department of Labor and Social Security listing the compensation for a workers loss of body parts: from the loss of a digit, "Loss of a thumb, or any finger past a joint = 6 months' salary," through "Loss of both arms = 24 months' salary and 90% pay through retirement age."

Lack of concern for the worker and the environment by entrenched or blossoming capitalists suffuses this section. Quotes from workers and factory owners, replete with names and locations, make up half of *The Price of a Finger*. These brief descriptions of work processes and pay scales echo, truly but sadly, the experiences of Jurgis Rudkus in Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle*, or the experiences of Carrie Meeber in Theodore Dreiser's 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*. For example, in "The Price of a Finger" she writes,

With your right hand, you slip  
strips of metal under a hammer  
backed by four-thousand pounds  
of pressure; with your left, you  
sweep molded parts into a pile.  
You do this once a second for a  
ten-hour shift, minus a half-hour  
lunch. You must concentrate. You  
must not lose a beat, or it's all  
over.

—Wang Chenghua, migrant  
worker with crushed fingers

"In Search of Chinese Poets" is abbreviated to short statements, and this entire five-page sub-section of where-are-they-now-poems almost, but not quite, acts as a counterpoint to the eighteen migrant workers named in the book's title poem. Many of these poets are actively writing and publishing, for example: Ming (Mindy Zhang) has published two collections of poetry translated from Chinese into English; Fei (Fei Ye) maintains a personal blog and published four volumes of poetry before fleeing China; Bei Dao (Zhao Zhenkai), a leading member of the 1970s-1980s avant-garde Misty Poets (a group that challenged the artistic strictures of Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution) is still writing and translating. One hopes Wang's future work will include an anthology featuring these writers.

Abject Reality: *Crossing the Line*

On the evening of Thursday, February 5, 2004, over twenty undocumented Chinese immigrants died when an incoming tide cut them off from the mainland while they picked cockles in Morecambe Bay in the northwest of England. On April 1, 2005, in response to this disaster, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority was created in the UK to regulate workers in the agricultural and shellfish industries. Unlicensed gangs continue to thrive, and the lack of oversight, proper training, and safety measures continues to affect the dispossessed—European and Asian immigrants entering a foreign country and reaching for the bottom-most rung of the economic ladder.

"Ten Thousand Waves," the title poem of this volume, places this tragedy in human perspective: Wang literally creates eighteen voices to represent many of those who died at Morecambe Bay.

On the night of the Lantern Festival  
We stream into the sea  
Jumbos, tiernels  
Three-forked prongs  
The wind bites our ears, hands, and toes  
Home, we say, home (Xie Xiao Wen, 1-6)

This and four other poems form the third section of the book, *Crossing the Line*, delineating the often abject reality of the immigrant experience: or, the attempt to create a new life from poverty. The imagery in these poems is as harsh and clear as the tenement and slum photographs of nineteenth-century New York City social reformer Jacob Riis. Photographs put a human face on human suffering; for writing to achieve the same result it must depend on a coherent narrative.

A woman who gives birth to a boy  
Returns home whole and glorious  
A woman who gives birth to a daughter  
Wanders in the woods  
A woman childless—  
Nothing but a filthy ghost ("My Name is Suni")

As the book circles back around to its beginning, we are offered this message: observe and record, record and react, react and participate. Wang holds up the objective mirror to disparity and poverty, but she is also reflected there, teaching by example.

The toil of this endeavor is apparent in the breadth and depth of the narratives, in the clear and concise measurement of its themes.

The blessing of this endeavor lies in the compassion shown for the named and the unnamed.