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Kai Löffelbein Common Dreams

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A critical look at a country of extremes: China and its migrant workers

Common Dreams reflects China's transition, its multilayered society and co-existing contrasts: modernity and tradition, urbanity and rurality, poverty and wealth, home, identity, and uprooting. While a large part of China's population shares China's economic success and has been living in the fast lane for years, nearly 300 millions of Chinese migrant workers are living marginalized in the outskirts of the large metropolises.

Since 2012, photographer Kai Löffelbein has repeatedly visited the different provinces of China. The result is a multidimensional book that takes a critical look at China's social and economic change with a focus on the environment of migrant workers—the realities of their work and life, their worries and dreams.

From the text *The Leap* by Kai Strittmatter:

Who decides where someone is born? What does a person do here, in the hamlet of Dongliao? Between mountains and rice fields, between sugar cane and lychee, between frog pond and banyan? Between the squat courtyard houses, once whitewashed, now patchy, in which a few old people hold out, and the three-storey cement boxes rising triumphantly next door, into which proudly move those to whom the children send money from the city? So, what does such a person do? They run away. Just like everyone else. The neighbour's daughter. The big brother. The whole class. All the peasants everywhere in China. It's a law of nature. 'Do I belong in the city?' asks Xu Lizhi at one point. 'I had to leave home. They call it "development".'

When he comes to Shenzhen, in 2010, Xu Lizhi is already writing poems, publishing them on his own blog. But he is a poet whom the monotony of the assembly line freezes 'into an old statue'. A poet who has to wrest the ten minutes for a verse from the leaden fatigue that never lets go of him from now on. He is a poet in a

white protective suit that leaves only a slit for the eyes so that the worker can control the three different hand movements. Movements he must perform 40,000 times a day when, for example, his task is to insert the lens of an iPhone into a small dust-free box. He compares himself and his colleagues on the factory floor to the soldiers of the first emperor's Terracotta Army. Those terracotta soldiers just followed orders, militarily drilled. They were also – he doesn't say it – burial objects. The city, the factory and death. Here, the poet found his material. Or rather: the material found him. Now it is his life that buries him, layer by layer.

Kai Löffelbein is a documentary photographer based in Hannover and Berlin, Germany. He studied political science in Berlin and photojournalism and documentary photography at University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Hannover. His work reflects his interest in the ways political and economic structures shape modern society. He divides his time between client work and personal projects. His work has been exhibited internationally in numerous shows and festivals and has received awards from Magnum Foundation Fund, UNICEF POY, Days Japan, Henri Nannen Award, among others. Since 2020 Kai teaches documentary photography and visual storytelling at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Dortmund.

Kai Strittmatter (*1965) is a German journalist and writer. For more than a decade he was the China correspondent for Germany's national newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. Among his published books is *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State*, which was named a Notable Work of Nonfiction of 2020 by the Washington Post.

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Press images



01_Guangdong Province is the leading toy production region.
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02_Songbirds have been a Chinese tradition for centuries.
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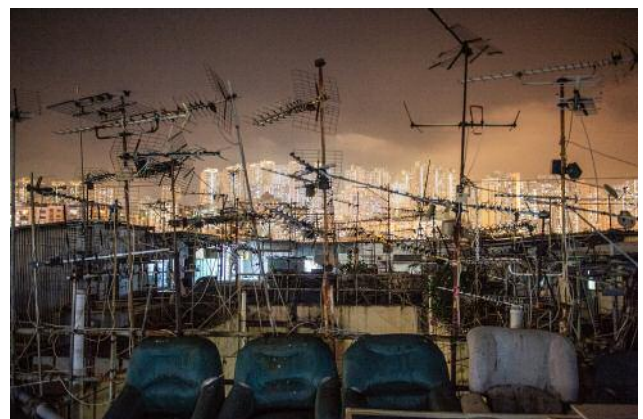
03_In a circus school in Hebei province, two girls stretch for the upcoming training.© Kai Löffelbein



04_Foremen permanently monitor the production process in the factory.
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05_Jockey on the sidelines of a racetrack in Gansu Province.
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06_Illegal rooftop housing in Hong Kong, one of the world's most expensive residential property markets.
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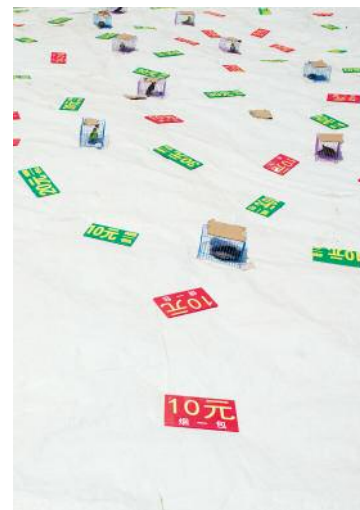
07_A woman sells ornamental fish at a pet market in Kunming.
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08_Wholesale market in Hohhot.
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09_A group of elderly people enjoys some casual conversation in the morning sun. In Shanxi, many people work in the coal industry. © Kai Löffelbein



10_Birds are presented as the prize of a lottery in the autonomous region of Tibet. © Kai Löffelbein



11_'Messenger of the governor'. Performer and musician of Shanxi Wenhua Opera. © Kai Löffelbein



12_Population growth, water scarcity, and land loss, due to increasing urbanisation and industrialisation, as well as climate change have emerged as challenges to food production. © Kai Löffelbein