

# WE, THE LABORERS

## 做工的人

\* Forthcoming as a TV series, *We, The Laborers*

*The unseen enablers of urban development, construction workers have become a marginalized community at the very center of modern wealth, sacrificing their bodies in labor that earns them neither respect nor decent compensation. Long-time construction supervisor Lin Ya-Ching makes them the center of his critical yet empathetic gaze in this non-fiction paean to the men and women who build our cities.*

The unseen enablers of urban development, construction workers have become a marginalized community at the very center of modern wealth. The buyers, residents, and renters of a building rarely think of the human effort that it represents, but every concrete foundation, plastered wall, and glazed tile was made useful by the hands of a construction worker. Yet the significance of their contribution, made via the sacrifice of their physical body, stands in stark contrast to their economic and social status. Construction workers are paid little and respected even less, while their presence and difficulties have been made invisible to society.

Lin Ya-Ching's new book, *We, The Laborers*, aims to change that. Lin draws on years of experience as a construction site supervisor to narrate the lives of the men and women he works with every day. Short, focused narratives foreground different individuals and groups of workers (like the "believers" featured in the excerpt) in order to achieve deeper levels of detail and more thoroughly depict the struggles of those who trade their bodies for their work.

### Lin Ya-Ching 林立青

A true child of the system, Lin Ya-Ching went step-by-step through Taiwan's education process, finishing his schooling according to test results and carrying his freshly-inked diploma into his first job on a



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construction site. He occupies himself as a writer with the quest to uncover the truth, and to use language to strip away the misconceptions that society piles atop certain groups of people.

# WE, THE LABORERS

By Lin Ya-Ching

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

## CONTENTS

### **The Social World of the Construction Site**

The Construction Site “Believer”  
Self-Medicating  
Bartending  
Foreign Workers  
Women  
Multigenerational Workers  
General Problems  
Mastering One’s Fate  
Thieves and Heroes  
Tickets and Fines

### **Keeping Up the Fight**

Education  
The Illusion of a Salary Advance  
One More Loan  
Travel by Water  
The Death of Ah Chung  
Taiwanese Wives  
Race and Bias  
Estrangement

### **Life**

Those Who Leave  
Singing at the Fast Food Restaurant  
Flirting with Betel Nut Girls  
“Teashop” Girls  
Ah Hsia’s Sticky Rice Dumplings  
Rainbow Fingernails  
Construction Site Gleaners  
Sign Holders  
Convenience Stores

## **The Construction Site “Believer”**

Making fun of “believers” has become a recent internet trend, and every so often a new crop of articles making fun of them appear in online media.

Yet my own observation suggests that construction site believers are quite different from online depictions of them. How should I put it? Construction site believers are there to work. Perhaps because I’ve been around these worksites for a long time, I see believers differently from the way they’re seen from afar. My definition of this group is: people who participate in Buddhist or Taoist temple activities, and who will lead or participate in religious celebrations.

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First, let me introduce a few unique characteristics of construction site believers. These believers work together, own nice motorbikes, will eat anything, frequently play hooky from work, and when you talk to them, you have to be willing to “take a loss.”

Let’s start with the way believers work together. Young believers who work on construction sites often do ‘collective’ work. They won’t come alone to a site, but rather in twos and threes, and will do work that allows them to stick together. For example, on a demolition site, three or four believers will do the demolition work, carry bricks, or move trash. This kind of labor allows them to work in their own way, and they’ll happily take down a structure together. Or, when cleaning off the equipment at an excavation site, two of them will grab a high-pressure hose and wash the wheels off together. Young believers tend to travel in pairs, and the pay might not be great, but if they work the whole day, they can still bring in something like thousands of yuan. No matter what they’re doing, they’ll have a cellphone or a little speaker playing music by Nine One One, and they’ll spend the day together that way. The believers that I’ve seen work hard all day, and then will head to their temple on their days off to relax.

Next, their fancy motorbikes. After younger believers have been to a site a few times, they don’t bother much with their clothes. They’ll wear a loose t-shirt with the name of a temple on it, or any old thing. If they have somewhere to go after work, they’ll put “clothes for after work” in the back of their bike to change into once they’ve showered. But no matter what, their motorbikes are always clean and shiny. Each one is well kept and looks as though it has been washed and waxed every day after work. They rarely buy the most popular vehicles like Yamaha, and they sneer at the Cygnus model. They think they’re saving some of the 100,000 yuan, but in the end it works out the same: they’ll buy a CUXI, RS ZERO, or BWS for 70,000 yuan, and then spend another 20,000 yuan to customize it and another 10,000 yuan to add their names to the bike, along with purple, green, and gold fittings. Some of them add their girlfriend’s name to the side as well. Sometimes they’ll get a used motorbike and customize it, but they’ll never spend 100,000 yuan to buy a Cygnus. A lot of young believers will clock in to work by taking a photo of their bike at a

worksite, and clock out with a photo of the bike against the setting sun. They'll often hang a protection charm from their temple from the throttle.

The next thing is that they don't care what they eat. This is a crucial difference between the younger and older workers. Young believers on the worksite are usually happy as long as someone feeds them, whether it be spareribs, drumsticks, or stew. They'll choose the same thing even while they're complaining about being sick of it. Cigarettes and non-alcoholic drinks are more important than the food. Whether or not they drink alcohol depends on the person and the particular job. Some of them absolutely have to drink and smoke, while others couldn't care less. The interesting thing is that, no matter what they're doing, they all like to order their drinks or fried chicken together, and they all drink sugar-free green tea. They're even happier if there's beer, because it makes us worksite managers lax about enforcing the rules. If there's a stand selling sausages or snacks nearby, they'll often sneak over and surround the stall, peeling fresh garlic to eat with the food they buy.

Playing hooky happens on every worksite and lots of workers do it. But since the believers are usually young, they have the energy after work to take girls out to karaoke or for a motorbike ride and some barbeque. Sometimes they stay out so late that they can't force themselves to get up in the morning, and other times they don't come just because they're in a bad mood. Unlike most young apprentices, believers often fight over some trivial thing until some of them just take off. When that happens, I have to keep an eye out or they'll come back with their friends and cause trouble. Sometimes they'll come back on their own after a few days. Occasionally someone's girlfriend will show up to keep a guy company or wait for him to get off work, and in that kind of situation, we get the contractor to let him off early.

As for "giving a little ground," this applies to young and old believers. For example, if a problem occurs with one of them, it's better to deal with it by giving a little ground instead of confronting them head-on, since that will only cause friction. For example, if you want them to recycle their bottles, don't yell at them. If you say that their waste is recyclable and that poor people are allowed to come collect it at night, they will obediently flatten their bottles. Some will help clean things up just out of niceness. Or if they put something in the wrong place, you might say: "There you go again, testing whether I'm paying attention!" And they'll all yell jokingly, "Stupid!" and fix it right away. If you just accuse them of doing something wrong, they may come back later looking to argue with you.

Young believers have one other special characteristic: they often won't volunteer the information that there's going to be a temple celebration, and instead will just say that they want a day off to go hang out with their friends. Older believers are different; they'll tell you earnestly which temple it is and which god is having a birthday.

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Older believers on worksites fall into two categories: those who work alongside their wives, and those who do not.

Those who work alongside their wives often pay close attention to technique, and have either finished or mostly finished their apprenticeship. These workers are often very reliable, and you don't have to worry about them causing trouble. They tend to take over one particular area, such as tiling, cement laying, plumbing and electric, painting, or carpentry, and they and their relatives will make up a work unit. These specialists work as a family, and are very dependable. They show off less, and are more likely to share food, work, and information with friends and relatives. They have their own tools, and will drive trucks or vans. Since they'll often get caught in traffic on the way home, the wife of the team will go out in the afternoon to buy pork buns, pigs-blood cakes, kabobs, noodles, fried chicken and other snacks to munch on, and they'll make a show of eating it all with relish on the job site. When it comes time to honor the dead, the main contractor will come help them burn paper money along with something brought from his own temple to send blessings to the dead. By a certain age, those men who split their time between the worksite and the temple will likely have become sworn temple brothers or Masters of the Hearth. They won't necessarily perform rites or take the lead at their temple, but they'll say: "For two years I've been the divination king. I did it last year, and this year I'll do it even more." They'll brag while their wives make little comments in agreement. They also like to listen to Jody Chiang or Showlen Maya duets.

The older believers who don't work next to their wives are more complicated. Some work as drivers, and they're relatively easy to deal with, and like to wear hats from whatever temple they belong to. When their fellow temple members go out as a group, they do the driving. Sometimes a whole work unit is made up of believers, which is a special situation. These units most frequently work as tunnel diggers or landfill cleaners, and every single one of them from the person driving the excavator to the person directing traffic is a believer. These groups actually don't cause many problems. You just need to talk to their boss and make sure everyone's clear on what the job is. The only inconvenience is that on festival days, when even though things need to get done, they won't show up to work.

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Honestly, I don't see anything so terrible about the temples. The believers live together in close-knit communities. They don't necessarily know what they're doing. They identify strongly with their hometown and with their temple and don't care much about mainstream social issues. Generally speaking, they don't have much ambition, but they embrace their own community; they don't like school, but are willing to sacrifice for their families; they're not interested in progress, but enthusiastically participate in walking prayers around their temple.

They aren't at all interested in which schools are better, and even look down on degrees. To them, working for big business is silly. Instead, they're very practically minded and think that getting by is enough. Members of the same temple group will help each other find work. If someone gets a job doing formwork, he'll recommend his friend to do the cement work, while an electrician will recommend a carpenter, and so on. When they're low on money, they'll beg for

help from their fellow temple members, and when they've earned some money, they'll immediately light candles at the temple and give more money for festival days.

They spend a lot of time picking up girls, and use rough, unsubtle language to express their interest. They marry young and have children quickly, and so naturally need to buy a car and a condo as soon as they can. In their free time, they put up a table in front of their temple and chat in a group about work, giving each other support. As they get older and develop more skills, they become experts and can be real contractors. When they earn some money, they thank their gods, their friends, their fellow temple members, and their wives for supporting them.

In fact, I think that compared to social climbers who go back to their hometowns to found start-ups or the artsy types who go back to open coffee shops, this so-called "believer generation" is the real force that keeps the city outskirts and its culture going.

### **Self-Medicating**

It's said that many of us in this profession rely on our strength in youth and early middle age to get us through. After about 50, everyone who works with their hands will start to collect scars and aches. In worksite medicine kits, the iodine, gauze, cotton balls, and bandages might all be expired, but the painkillers will always be in demand.

I have to admit that I'm one such example. Like many others, I always keep some painkillers in my bag and in the company car even though I don't have to do manual labor anymore. When my head throbs because I'm working in the rain, I'll pop a pill. I also carry an inhaler with me, although as I've gradually gotten into the habit of exercising, I've used it less and less.

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Honestly, even today I have trouble telling the pain pills apart. The workers don't know the difference either. Our understanding of these medications just comes from hearing about them from each other. Some workers refuse to take anything but Panadol for the pain; others, such as those who breathe in a lot of particulate dust like carpenters and cement workers, really need medication to assuage their stuffy noses and sore throats. Over time, every person develops their own pocket med kit. Many male workers believe that sorghum liquor makes medicine more effective, and some workers will put liquor into a water bottle and use it to wash down their painkillers. Women workers tend toward cough syrup. One type of cough syrup made of licorice root is supposed to help all kinds of diseases, from aching hands and numb feet to any sort of respiratory ailment. It works as soon as you take it, and everything can be cured by drinking the whole bottle. Other women workers just bear their pain, and have trouble breathing as soon as the weather turns cold. I've had that experience, so I carry the same kind of inhaler than many of the women workers use. Many times someone who's become dizzy and out of breath working underground has been taken off the worksite and given "Berotec" to help them recover.

In fact, this frequently happens with those much older than I am, workers with more responsibility. Younger workers don't have to take responsibility for management or directing other workers, and so can take time away from the job site to seek medical attention. Others see a doctor when they feel overworked, which is just a good excuse to leave the job. But older workers have families to support, and the other senior workers depend on them, so they can't just take time off to go see a doctor. Everyone wants to be healthy. For those who work for daily wages, a day off to see a doctor is a day without pay, and whatever the doctor has to say might be even more worrisome.