

Southernizing the North: Lived Precarity and Britain's "Internal South" in

Wang Bang's *The Texture of Hard Times*

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Abstract

This article reads Wang Bang's *The Texture of Hard Times* through the concept of "southernization" within the Global North, understood here as the production of peripheralized conditions within the capitalist core. Through a close analysis of Wang's nonfictional narrative, it examines four interconnected dimensions of lived precarity: cross-class mobility and unstable labor, the sensory experience of inadequate housing, bodily need and shame in contexts of period poverty and fuel poverty, and localized practices of mutual aid. Wang's migrant perspective reveals how neoliberal policies, particularly housing privatization and welfare retrenchment, have eroded the postwar social contract and rendered basic needs precarious for marginalized groups in the UK. By framing these conditions as an "internal South," the article challenges rigid North–South binaries and argues that capitalist modernity distributes vulnerability not only across nations but also within them. Wang's work further highlights how grassroots care networks offer fragile but meaningful forms of support within systemic insecurity, helping preserve dignity amid structural inequality.

Keywords: Wang Bang; Global South; southernization; precarity; neoliberalism

The Global South has increasingly become a critical term for rethinking inequality, marginality, and uneven life chances under global capitalism. It no longer refers only to a set of geographical regions, but also to a relational position produced through colonial histories, racialized divisions of labor, uneven development, and the unequal circulation of capital and knowledge (Connell, 2007; Dirlik, 2007). For literary and cultural studies, this shift has made it possible to reconsider how marginal locations of writing challenge North-centered narratives

Received 19 April 2026; revised 23 May 2026; accepted 11 June 2026; available online 25 June 2026; version of record 30 June 2026.

Citation: Miao, C. (2026). Southernizing the North: Lived precarity and Britain's "Internal South" in Wang Bang's *The Texture of Hard Times*. *Journal of Language*, 2(2), 74–96.
<https://doi.org/10.64699/26BDPJ8574>

of modernity, value, and social order (Mignolo, 2009; West-Pavlov, 2018). Yet the concept becomes more difficult, and perhaps more revealing, when it is brought to bear on texts set not in the geopolitical South but within the capitalist core itself. Wang Bang's *The Texture of Hard Times: An Observational Memoir of Life in the UK* offers precisely such a case. Written by a Chinese migrant woman living in Britain, the book records not a distant "South" but the precarious interiors of the Global North.

In employing the word "South", this essay does not mean that poverty in Britain can be equated with the historical experiences of the Global South, nor do I use "the South" as a loose metaphor for hardship in the metropolitan core. As Arif Dirlik (2007) observes, the term may also refer to the "native pockets of poverty that are very much reminiscent of the South" (p. 15). This observation allows us to ask how relations of deprivation, dispossession, and exposure can be produced within the very spaces conventionally imagined as secure. In this article, southernization is used to refer to a relational process through which conditions often associated with peripheralization—dispossession, infrastructural fragility, exposure to market risk, racialized and gendered labor, and weakened claims to public support—are generated within the Global North itself. Southernization brings these mechanisms into a frame that disturbs the assumed opposition between a secure North and an impoverished South. At the same time, the term must remain bounded: it cannot erase the specific colonial, geopolitical, and developmental histories of the Global South, nor can it turn "South" into a generalized synonym for suffering. Moreover, what additional work does the language of the Global South perform here? And what happens when that vocabulary is brought into contact with a Chinese-language migrant nonfiction text rather than with policy analysis or social theory? This article addresses these questions by asking how Wang Bang's writing renders visible an "internal South" within Britain, and how her formally hybrid mode of nonfictional witnessing allows structural inequality to appear not as abstraction, but as lived texture.

Wang's nonfiction is valuable for this inquiry not only because it records poverty in Britain, but because of how it writes that poverty. The book is neither detached reportage nor self-enclosed memoir. Wang herself describes it first as a memoir of life in Britain and only then as an observation of British society, politics, livelihood, and culture. Li Jing characterizes Wang's practice as a "mixed" observational form that draws together nonfiction, fiction, journalism, and essayistic argument (Li, 2023, p. 11). This hybridity matters because it prevents the first-person "I" from remaining a purely autobiographical center. Wang begins from her own confusion, humiliation, and precarious labor, but the narrative repeatedly moves outward toward other lives, public institutions, policy histories, and local forms of mutual aid. Writing out of lived experience, close observation, and direct participation, Wang turns structural inequality into texture, voice, and scene.

This article argues that Wang's book offers a literary articulation of the internal southernization of Britain. It examines four moments in the text: cross-class mobility and precarious work; damp housing and the sensory wear of poverty; menstrual precarity and bodily shame; and the shift from observation to participation in local care networks. Across these scenes, the article shows how Wang's Chinese-language migrant nonfiction makes visible the unstable boundary between North and South without reducing either term to a metaphor, while also showing poverty to be constitutive of neoliberal capitalism rather than an accidental failure of the welfare state.

1. Mobility, Shame, and the Grammar of Precarious Work

One of the first things Wang Bang does in *The Texture of Hard Times* is to divide the "I" that speaks. In the preface, she writes that she was, "on the surface," a special correspondent for a Chinese-language magazine, moving among Burberry fashion shows, the Tate galleries, and the English National Ballet; "in reality," however, she was a racialized resident of a poor neighborhood, a sales interpreter for a Regent Street antique watch shop, and a door-to-door

“Chinese massage therapist” working in the snow (Wang, 2022, p.2). “On the surface” and “in reality” suggest a syntax of disjunction. They place two incompatible social descriptions of the same subject side by side. The same first-person figure who can enter elite cultural spaces is also the worker whose access to those spaces depends on unstable labor. What appears here is not a narrative of arrival, but a life under pressure, with prestige and precarity occupying the same sentence without settling into coherence.

A few lines later, Wang gives that pressure a sharper name. She describes herself as “switching faces to survive between different classes,” and immediately adds that such humility only deepened her sense of shame and her longing for dignity (Wang, 2022, p. 2). “Switching faces” names the demand to become different things in different spaces—journalist, translator, service worker, migrant intermediary—while also registering the cost of that adaptability. Wang does not cast this as urban sophistication or successful self-fashioning. Instead, the words “survive,” “humility,” and “shame” keep the violence of adjustment in view. What accumulates through such movement is not confidence, but humiliation; what becomes more urgent is not mobility itself, but dignity. Even at this early point, the first-person voice is already marked by self-exposure: it enters spaces to which it does not fully belong while remaining acutely aware of the price of becoming legible within them.

The split self comes into a clearer shape in a concrete scene. Wang recalls putting on her “Sunday best” to perform a door-to-door massage service in an upscale residence near Kensington Palace. The space is introduced through a sequence of highly charged details: a neoclassical building with Roman corridors, a Polish doorman in navy uniform, standing with his back “parallel to the columns,” and, above all, a spiral staircase whose black iron curves form “spiral eyes looking down at her” (Wang, 2022, p. 12). Wang does not simply enter a rich interior but also enters a space that is already reading her. By giving the staircase a gaze, she turns architecture into an instrument of social scrutiny. In such a context, the sunlight falling

from the meeting point of the windows and skylight does not illuminate neutrally either. Instead, it turns into “needles” as she presses the doorbell (Wang, 2022, p. 12). What makes this scene so striking is the way class difference is registered through sensation. The space is not described from a stable, surveying perspective. It is apprehended by a body that feels itself scrutinized, measured, and slightly pierced. Even Wang’s phrase “Sunday best” carries a tonal ambiguity and irony: it suggests both self-respect and self-conscious staging, as though entry into this world requires costume as much as labor.

The encounter inside the apartment shifts the scene again. The woman who opens the door is not the mistress of the house, but another worker whose place in that elegant domestic space is itself conditional. At first, she appears in the idiom of refinement: black cashmere, knee-length skirt, a soft Minnan-accented Mandarin that makes Wang feel secretly pleased at having secured “such a client” (Wang, 2022, p. 12). But once the woman undresses, the register changes. Her body is dry-skinned, sharply boned, and marked with surgical scars. Wang writes that she looks at her “like a Swiss watch worn out over many years, its spring already losing elasticity” (Wang, 2022, p. 12). The simile renders the body as a mechanism fatigued by long use. The figure of the Swiss watch recalls the world of luxury goods and fine surfaces that surrounds the scene, but here precision has become depletion. When the woman explains that she has worked in the household for more than five years, cared for the children “as if they were [her] own,” and is now being dismissed because the children have grown up and she herself has become unwell, the apartment no longer signifies stable privilege. What Wang encounters is not simply wealth, but a layered economy of service labor in which one precarious woman meets another within the shell of an affluent home. By the time Wang leaves, even the generous five-pound tip, practically a charitable donation, cannot restore the sense of glamour that accompanied her arrival. The staircase, once almost enchanted, now resembles “a carousel abruptly brought to a halt,” suddenly stripped of its magic (Wang, 2022, p. 13). The image

reverses the earlier sense of arrival; the staircase no longer promises upward access, but suddenly stops.

A different but related scene unfolds in the artist's "open studio" (Wang, 2022, p. 22). Here Wang enters as a curious visitor, drawn by the familiar promise of art, refreshments, and middle-class hospitality. Yet the kitchen into which she wanders quickly becomes another space of class pedagogy. Bending down to admire the old black-and-white floor tiles, she is caught by the hostess, then drawn into a careful display of Georgian plates, specialized chopping boards, and fresh organic lemon juice (Wang, 2022, pp. 22–24). What Wang records so well in this passage is the quiet aggression of cultivated taste. The hostess does not merely own beautiful objects; she arranges them as proofs of order, inheritance, and discernment. The cutting boards for raw meat, cooked meat, vegetables, and cheese function not only as domestic tools but also as part of an entire regime of distinction. The scene shows how wealth speaks through objects, habits, and assumptions. That is why the conversation can move so quickly from kitchen implements and desserts to the judgment that poor people buy unhealthy supermarket food because they "lack self-control" (Wang, 2022, p. 25). The violence of the remark lies precisely in its casualness.

Wang's response is one of the strongest moments in the chapter because it remains bodily before it becomes argumentative. She recalls that she herself had lived through a whole winter on Tesco muffins costing one pound for four, and then writes, with abrupt simplicity, "I suddenly felt hot all over" (Wang, 2022, p. 25). Rather than rebutting the hostess in sociological terms, Wang shows how class judgment lands on the body. Heat replaces explanation. Shame arrives as a somatic event. The passage captures the instant when necessity is translated into character: what had been a matter of cheap survival food is re-read under another's gaze as moral failure. Such an interpretation recalls an older British tendency to blame poverty on individual laziness. Several centuries later, although society has changed, Wang's entry into

elite spaces is still permitted only so long as her presence remains functional, ornamental, or innocuously curious. The moment she becomes too close, too legible, or too knowing, the codes of hierarchy reassert themselves.

Taken together, these scenes show that mobility in Wang's writing is never simply a matter of movement between places but unequal class conditions. To pass from poor neighborhoods into elegant interiors, from service work into artistic sociability, is also to move between regimes of reading: one is watched, interpreted, and measured differently in each space. Wang's account of London therefore does not resemble a story of metropolitan openness. What Wang records is a social world in which polished metropolitan surfaces depend on unstable labor, feminized care, and the moral sorting of bodies, a pattern that also resonates with broader accounts of racial capitalism and differentiated mobility in contemporary Britain (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2024). It is in this sense that her writing begins to disclose what this article calls an "internal South": not a distant elsewhere, but a structure of exposure and disposability embedded within the everyday life of the North.

2. Housing, Sensory Wear, and the Texture of Poverty

If Wang's movement reveals the paradox of living in the cosmopolitan, her writing of the dwelling conditions further suggests a neglected internal South within the Global North. One of the most memorable images in *The Texture of Hard Times* appears early in Wang's account of her life in Canning Town, where she shares an overcrowded house with strangers and sleeps in a room assembled from "one sheet of glass and three partitions," a space she calls a "crystal coffin" (Wang, 2022, pp. 10–11). The phrase preserves the contradictory feel of the room: transparent yet enclosed, makeshift yet mortuary, visually open yet barely livable. The word "coffin" sharpens the sense that lower-class life in contemporary Britain is not merely cramped, but claustrophobic and faintly deathlike. In such a house, private life is reduced to something exposed, compressed, and faintly deathlike. Wang's irony sharpens the effect. She

writes that the sagging single bed “cured” her bipolar restlessness, since no one could repeatedly sit down and stand up on it (Wang, 2022, p. 10). The joke is bleak but precise. Housing insecurity is not introduced here as an abstract social problem, but as a room whose dimensions reorganize posture, movement, and even the possibility of rest.

Wang’s descriptions of rented life continue in this register of sensory pressure. In Hounslow West, the former council house she moves into has cracked outer walls, damp interior ones, and a toilet whose water tank makes an intolerable noise, “fortunately” drowned out by the constant sound of airplanes (Wang, 2022, p. 13). Every few seconds, she writes, a Boeing seems to sweep past “across my eyelashes,” startling even her only houseplant (Wang, 2022, pp. 13–15). What is striking here is not simply the fact of noise, but the way Wang writes it: the plane does not pass overhead in neutral description, but crosses the eyelashes, as if external infrastructure had entered the most delicate surface of the body. The same is true of the dampness that later mixes with mold, cooking oil, and stale leftovers, leaving clothes never fully dry. Wang does not present poor housing as a matter of lacking ownership alone. She writes it as something that settles into the senses—sound, smell, skin, sleep—and slowly wears down the body. In this respect, houses in *The Texture of Hard Times* become one of the forms through which poverty is felt.

What lends Wang’s writing its historical and analytical depth is that she does not merely describe how poverty is experienced by bodies inhabiting dilapidated dwellings; she also reflects on how such conditions come into being. Confronted with the mould spreading across the wall, Wang asks, “Where did they come from?” (Wang, 2022, p. 14), and begins to trace the problem back to its historical origins. This move gives her writing a depth of reflection that exceeds ordinary memoir or social observation. She recalls that postwar Labour governments, in pursuit of the ideal of decent housing for all, built large numbers of council houses equipped with private kitchens, bathrooms, and sometimes gardens, thereby addressing long-standing

urban problems of sanitation and overcrowding. Council housing was built not only for white working-class districts but also for racialized poor communities, and, as Wang notes, a social consensus once existed that paying reasonable rent to the government was better than paying exorbitant sums to private landlords and banks (Wang, 2022, p. 14). Her tone in recounting this earlier moment is noticeably lighter; she even remarks that her Indian landlord “happily obtained a council house” (Wang, 2022, p. 14). The phrasing registers a historical memory of housing as provision rather than speculation.

The tonal shift is equally clear when Wang turns to the later transformation of housing policy. Her remark that “golden ages never last” (Wang, 2022, p. 14) both acknowledges the earlier achievement of council housing and registers its historical erosion. She attributes that erosion to Thatcher’s Right to Buy policy, which transferred public housing into private ownership and increasingly pushed it into market circulation. As Aled Davies shows, the idea behind Right to Buy belonged to a longer Conservative commitment to building a “property-owning democracy,” one that had, by the Thatcher era, been decisively reworked under the influence of economic liberalism (Davies, 2013). In this ideological frame, housing was no longer understood primarily as social provision. It was recoded as a route to ownership, self-reliance, and personal freedom. Matthew Francis further argues that Thatcherism radicalized this tradition by making home ownership “the foundation stone of a capital-owning democracy” and by linking property to wider claims about choice, independence, and release from “bureaucratic control” (Francis, 2012, pp. 293–294). What was at stake, then, was not only a change in tenure, but a wider neoliberal redefinition of housing: the retreat of public responsibility was represented as the expansion of private liberty. In this sense, Wang’s mold-stained rooms and exhausted utilities can be read as the domestic afterlife of what Harvey terms “accumulation by dispossession,” whereby collectively sustained infrastructures are converted into private gain while insecurity is redistributed downward (Harvey, 2005).

Wang's narration captures the contradiction of this project with particular sharpness. She remarks, with obvious irony, that her Indian landlord benefited from Thatcher's "good policy" (Wang, 2022, p. 15). On the surface, the phrase appears to acknowledge the landlord's good fortune in obtaining and later purchasing a council house. Yet Wang quickly undercuts any celebratory reading. Even this comparatively fortunate family, she notes, must still save enormous down payments for their children. The apparent gain of one generation becomes the burden of the next. In this way, Wang exposes the temporal logic of Thatcherite neoliberalism: a policy presented as empowerment for ordinary people produces, in the longer run, a housing order structured by speculation, inherited inequality, and permanent insecurity. As Francis (2012) points out, under Thatcherism, property ownership came to be associated not only with wealth but also with economic choice, status, and even a fuller form of citizenship. The sale of council housing was imagined as a way of enfranchising the many in the economic life of the nation. Wang's text quietly dismantles that rhetoric as her rooms bear not the signs of enfranchisement, but of deferred maintenance, exhausted utilities, dampness, noise, and bodily wear. By juxtaposing postwar council housing as collective provision with Thatcherite home ownership as marketized aspiration, Wang shows how neoliberalism reorganizes social responsibility and then redescribes that withdrawal as freedom, while the costs return as mold on walls, unaffordable rents, and increasingly precarious forms of habitation.

Taken together, Wang's exploration of dwelling shows that housing in contemporary Britain is not simply where poverty becomes visible, but one of the mechanisms through which poverty is produced, normalized, and transmitted. The crystal coffin, the damp walls, the roar of airplanes, the half-dry clothes, and the unaffordable rents are not isolated details of personal hardship. They are the lived afterlife of a housing order reshaped by privatization, marketization, and the state's retreat from social responsibility. By tracing the route from postwar council housing to Thatcherite reform, Wang writes both as an outsider who has

migrated to the UK and as someone who has directly experienced the afterlives of Thatcherite reform. Wang's reflections reveal that the housing crisis epitomizes a broader neoliberal logic in which shelter is commodified, risk is redistributed downward, and the burden of maintaining everyday life falls increasingly on ordinary households. In this way, *The Texture of Hard Times* shows how cramped, degrading, and unstable forms of habitation are reproduced within the capitalist core itself. What emerges from Wang's account is therefore not simply poverty in Britain, but a distinctly southernized mode of dwelling: a form of life in which exposure, exhaustion, and service-bound insecurity have become part of the ordinary texture of the Global North.

3. Burdened Body, Need, and Shame

In the previous section, I have analyzed Wang's observation of the housing conditions and her reflections on how housing policies affect people's living experiences. The housing problems have already affected the textures of people's everyday life. The bodily sensation has already been present throughout the earlier scenes: the airplane seems to sweep "across my eyelashes," dampness and mold cling to skin and sleep, and class contempt in the artist's kitchen arrives as the sudden feeling of being "hot all over" (Wang, 2022, pp. 13–15, 25). In this section, I will further analyze how Wang's observation and reflection further our understanding on how poverty affect the body.

When discussing police officer Sue Loaker's visit to a struggling household, Wang Bang presents a striking sequence of deprivations, including fuel poverty, toilet paper poverty, and period poverty. She recounts that one day Loaker forced open the door of a house where there was "no electricity" and where it was "cold as a morgue" (Wang, 2022, p. 30). Because the family could not afford to pay for electricity and gas, they had resorted to burning rubbish on the floor for warmth. As a result, the walls and ceiling were blackened with smoke, "as if they had just gone through the Second World War" (Wang, 2022, p. 31). The description is

edged with exaggeration and irony, yet it keeps returning the reader to what poverty does to the body. “Cold as a morgue” does not simply register low temperature but also evokes a space from which warmth, vitality, and ordinary livability have drained away. The image of walls and ceilings scorched with smoke suggests a further loss: people are reduced to burning rubbish in order to secure the minimum condition of staying alive. Wang’s reference to “the Second World War” makes the scene even harder to ignore. She is writing about twenty-first-century Britain, a country ordinarily associated with advanced capitalism and material abundance. Yet the scene she presents suggests that beneath the bright surfaces of contemporary Britain, some lives are still being lived in conditions reminiscent of wartime scarcity. The effect is unsettling as it presses the reader to ask what kind of social and political order allows such conditions to persist. Wang does not leave the episode at the level of a single household. She also turns to statistics to show that this is not an isolated case. Citing BBC data, she notes that when Arctic air struck Britain in 2018, there were 250,000 homeless people in England enduring severe cold (Wang, 2022, p. 30). Of these, 4,134 were long-term rough sleepers, spreading sheets of plastic on snow-covered ground and curling up “like wild foxes” beneath pedestrian bridges or outside supermarkets (Wang, 2022, p. 30). The statistics widen the scene, linking this household to a larger landscape of cold, exposure, and rough sleeping in contemporary Britain. Fuel poverty appears not as a marginal anomaly, but as part of a broader landscape in which bodily suffering and the struggle for basic warmth affect a substantial population.

If fuel poverty can still be partially attributed to the harshness of winter, the period poverty Wang records is even more painful in what it reveals. Wang recalls that, on a freezing night, Sue Loaker gathered together all the members of the local food bank. Standing in a church so cold that it seemed to have turned blue, Loaker said: “it is not only fuel poverty. There is also toilet paper poverty and period poverty. Once, our police station received a report that a secondary-school girl had stolen a box of sanitary pads” (Wang, 2022, p. 31). She paused,

struggling to contain her emotion, and added: “A box of sanitary pads. I want all of you to think about that” (Wang, 2022, p. 31). It was this incident that led her to establish an “Essentials” collection point, working with the food bank and other local organizations to provide those in need with help for fuel, toilet paper, and sanitary products. The episode is quietly devastating. What gives it its force is precisely the disproportion between the smallness of the object and the scale of the crisis it exposes. A box of sanitary pads is an ordinary, inexpensive item, yet in Wang’s account it becomes evidence that poverty has entered one of the most basic and intimate dimensions of bodily life.

In a developed country, sanitary pads should be an ordinary item of daily life rather than a luxury. When people hear of women lacking menstrual products, they are more likely to imagine impoverished or war-torn regions in Africa or Asia than contemporary Britain. Period poverty seems to belong to the Global South rather than to the developed West. Yet Wang’s observation unsettles that assumption. Sanitary products appear here alongside heating and toilet paper as goods no longer guaranteed by ordinary life in contemporary Britain. Menstrual care, domestic warmth, and basic hygiene are grouped together as emergency provisions. What ought to belong to the ordinary background of social existence has become precarious enough to require charitable distribution. What is at stake, then, is not merely the lack of a product, but the ability to manage menstruation without pain, exposure, or humiliation. Sanitary pads are not incidental commodities. They are part of the material conditions that allow women to move through school, work, and everyday life while maintaining bodily comfort, privacy, and dignity.

This is also why the “Essentials” station matters in more than one sense. On the one hand, it is clearly an act of practical care, an attempt to repair what public provision no longer secures. On the other hand, it also shows how far bodily need has been pushed out of the realm of ordinary entitlement and into the realm of emergency aid. Menstruation normally belongs to the private, taken-for-granted routines of everyday life. Once sanitary pads enter the sphere

of charitable distribution, however, that privacy is broken. Need becomes visible, and visibility may easily turn into shame. Even though Sue Loaker opens the “Essentials” station to provide poor women with sanitary pads and other necessities, those who come to receive them must still bear the diminishment that may accompany having to ask for such basic items in public or semi-public settings. The “Essentials” station shows not only how bodily upkeep is displaced into emergency aid, but also how need becomes publicly visible and therefore vulnerable to shame, a pattern that resonates with broader analyses of stigma and abjection in neoliberal Britain (Tyler, 2013; Shildrick, 2018).

Wang’s phrase “dirt poor” (Wang, 2022, p. 31) marks a further turn in her writing. By this point, poverty is no longer presented only through cramped rooms, damp walls, sanitary pads, or the difficulty of keeping warm. It has become something Wang is trying to name and think through. The lack of heat, toilet paper, menstrual products, a place to wash, or a room in which to rest does not remain a set of isolated hardships. It leads Wang to ask what kind of society produces lives in which even the simplest forms of bodily upkeep become uncertain. That phrase of “dirt poor” is coarse, bodily, and humiliating. It suggests not only economic deprivation, but a condition in which poverty clings to the body and to daily life like grime.

At this point Wang begins to search for causes. Drawing on the Broke Project’s list of factors behind poverty, she gives particular emphasis to the unequal distribution of resources produced by discrimination (Wang, 2022, p. 32). She writes that in Britain “chains of discrimination are everywhere”: against poor farmers, manual workers, sex workers, LGBT people, the homeless, the elderly, and even those judged by appearance (Wang, 2022, p. 32). The list shows how poverty is produced. Discrimination does not remain at the level of attitude or prejudice. It shapes who is more likely to lose housing, be denied support, be pushed into insecure work, or be treated as undeserving once they fall into need. What Wang is tracing, in other words, is not a collection of separate injustices, but a pattern in which vulnerability is

distributed unevenly across society and then made to appear natural or deserved.

This is where her writing reaches beyond observation without losing contact with lived detail. Wang notes that postwar Europe once built up a relatively extensive system of taxation and welfare in response to inequality, offering low-income groups access to council housing, education, benefits, and public healthcare. Yet, as she writes, the capitalists, conglomerates, and politicians aligned with them have long insisted that poverty is the fault of the poor themselves, and have steadily dismantled this system through austerity and the privatization of public resources (Wang, 2022, p. 33). The point is not made through abstract theory alone. It emerges from the scenes that have already accumulated in the chapter: people burning rubbish to keep warm, girls unable to afford sanitary pads, women reduced to washing quickly in public toilets, and food banks functioning as places not just of nutrition but of heat and human contact. Wang's method is cumulative. A minor object, a bodily inconvenience, or a moment of embarrassment gradually opens onto a broader diagnosis of welfare erosion, privatized risk, and moralized need.

Read in this way, Wang's Britain begins to resemble what Connell and Dirlik describe as the South: not simply a geographical elsewhere, but a condition shaped by unequal access to resources, recognition, and life chances (Connell, 2007; Dirlik, 2007). In Wang's account, southernization appears not only in precarious housing or unstable labor, but in the fact that basic bodily needs become unstable. Warmth, hygiene, menstruation, food, and shelter are no longer secured as part of ordinary life. They must be pieced together through self-denial, charity, improvisation, and the constant risk of shame. This gives southernization a more precise meaning. It names a condition in which the infrastructure of everyday life has grown so fragile that survival increasingly depends on patchwork arrangements, while the burden of that fragility is pushed back onto the body. By tracing this condition to the neoliberal valorization of privatization, market rule, and the withdrawal of social responsibility, Wang's observations

also reveal the deeper causes of southernization within the North, giving her writing a sharper critical and analytical force.

4. Local Care and the Fragile Public Life of the Nearby

The Texture of Hard Times does not end with cold rooms, unpaid bills, sanitary pads, or food parcels. After writing about damp walls, half-dry clothes, rough sleepers, and the embarrassment attached to asking for help, Wang Bang turns to another set of scenes: visiting elderly people at home, packing donated food, handing out tea and biscuits, delivering library books, and walking through places where second-hand furniture, shared meals, and conversation still hold people together. Wang does not suggest that the damage has disappeared. She keeps that damage in view, but she also begins to notice what people do after the damage has already entered ordinary life. Her attention shifts from exposing damage to tracing the small, repeated acts through which people stop one another from falling completely out of the social world.

This shift is already announced in the preface, where Wang writes that she moved “from an observer to an actioner” (Wang, 2022, p. 1). She recalls that from early 2014 to early 2015 she volunteered with Age UK, visiting elderly people who lived alone. From 2018 to 2021 she worked at a food bank, helping distribute relief supplies. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, she joined a local refugee support organization. These activities, she writes, brought “a huge turning point” to her own life: they helped her make friends and eased the loneliness she felt as an outsider (Wang, 2022, p. 4). Wang does not present this turn as moral heroism. What changes first is not society at large, but her own immediate world. Community work gives her people to meet, places to go, and tasks to do. It brings her back into contact with

others not through the market or through cultural prestige, but through regular local involvement. In this sense, Wang's "action" begins not in grand politics, but in showing up, again and again, in places where needs are concrete and shared.

That is why Wang places so much weight on situations in which people can sit "face to face." In the preface, she writes that only in this way can people resist atomization and loneliness (Wang, 2022, p. 9). The phrase sounds simple, but in the world of the book it carries real force. Earlier chapters show people living in subdivided rooms, washing in public toilets, eating whatever they can afford, hiding in sleeping bags, or feeling ashamed at food banks. Against such scenes, to sit face to face is already to undo something. It means that a person's need does not remain shut inside private humiliation. It enters a shared setting. In Wang's writing, it happens through ordinary arrangements: a table, a kettle, a biscuit tin, a warm room, a volunteer who listens, a recurring visit. These are small things, but Wang keeps noticing them because they allow people to remain visible to one another in ways that are not purely administrative or punitive.

The food bank is one of the clearest examples. Wang had already shown earlier that people come there not only for canned beans, rice, biscuits, and boxed milk, but sometimes simply to talk to someone or to escape the cold for a while. In the later chapters, this function becomes even clearer. The food bank is not just a point of distribution. It is one of the few places left where a person can enter without buying anything and still be received. It also becomes a small point of contact between people who might otherwise remain isolated inside their own hardship. Wang does not inflate these places into symbols of redemption. She stays with their practical uses. Food is handed out. Tea is poured. Someone is listened to. Someone

gets warm. Someone returns next week. The work is repetitive, unglamorous, and often insufficient, but it keeps daily life going where larger systems no longer do.

Wang's discussion of "Friends of the Library" makes the same point in a quieter register. During the pandemic, volunteers continued sending books to readers by wrapping requested titles in newspaper and leaving them at people's doors (Wang, 2022, pp. 259–260). Wang notices the concrete details of this work: the wrapping, the delivery, the continuity of borrowing and returning. What is being preserved is not only reading material. It is the habit of connection itself, which Wang calls the "beauty of connection" (Wang, 2022, p. 249). Even during the harshest periods, when "the worst people govern the worst of times" (Wang, 2022, p. 263), the care, mutual aid, and communality formed through the nearby still provide a trace of warmth. For Wang, a Chinese migrant in Britain, these local connections embody a form of "place-making" (Wang, 2022, p. 197) that adds meaning to the chaotic world. The nearby thus show how the significance of community and interpersonal bond in times of hardship and crisis (Hancock et al., 2012).

A more material version of this appears in Wang's account of Emmaus. She does not present it simply as a charity for homeless people. What she observes is a whole practical arrangement made out of reused things and shared labor: old furniture, gardens, meals, residents, volunteers, and space organized so that people and objects are returned to use. Wang pays particular attention to these details: charity does not operate in abstraction. Through ordinary, repeated actions—how a table is reused, how meals are eaten together, how a room is kept functioning, how discarded objects do not remain waste—life is sustained. This gives her writing a particular texture. As government withdraws further from common spaces, the

agency of ordinary people and the bonds of connection and mutual aid become tools for resisting southernization within the North.

While Wang praises the beauty of connections, she never pretends that these nearby forms of care solve the structural problems described earlier. The food bank, the “Essentials” station, the library volunteers, the elderly visits, and Emmaus prevent people from bearing need entirely alone. They return warmth, books, food, conversation, and daily routines to lives thinned by unemployment, poor housing, illness, and welfare retrenchment. In this sense, these local spaces do not reverse southernization within the North. They achieve something smaller but still significant: they show that when ordinary life is pushed toward insecurity, fragmentation, and privatized coping, people can still assemble nearby forms of support that hold some of the damage in place and prevent complete abandonment. Wang’s book ultimately suggests that the internal South of Britain is not defined solely by deprivation. It is also marked by the practical, unfinished work through which people attempt to make life bearable again. Though modest, these acts provide direction and hope for imagining a more equal, harmonious, and caring future. In the preface, Wang cites the British cultural historian David Fleming’s remark that big problems do not require large-scale solutions; a basic framework for action, together with countless small responses, is enough (Wang, 2022, p. 4). By invoking Fleming in this way, Wang affirms a guarded but persistent hope for the future: not hope grounded in grand promises, but hope sustained by small, repeated acts of care and repair.

5. Conclusion

Wang Bang’s *The Texture of Hard Times* does not simply document poverty in Britain, nor does it merely offer a series of observations on hardship. Rather, through her attention to mobility, dwelling, bodily need, and local care under conditions of precarity, Wang renders

visible what may be called an internal South within the Global North. In her account, poverty is not an isolated social problem or a temporary deviation from an otherwise stable order. It appears instead as a structured condition embedded in the ordinary textures of life: in subdivided rooms, damp walls, unaffordable rents, sanitary pads, fuel bills, food parcels, public toilets, and the quiet humiliation of having to ask for help. What Wang's writing reveals, therefore, is not simply that poverty exists in Britain, but that the "North" itself can generate forms of deprivation, exposure, and disposability commonly associated with the "South". Her hybrid mode of observation—moving among memoir, participation, social inquiry, and reflection—allows her to trace this condition without losing sight of its bodily and emotional weight.

Read in this way, the significance of the Global South lies not only in its reference to historically colonized or economically underdeveloped regions, but also in its usefulness as a critical framework for tracing how unequal life chances are produced across different locations by the same structural forces. Wang's Britain begins to resemble what Connell and Dirlik describe as the South not because it ceases to be part of the capitalist core, but because the lives of the poor, and even of many ordinary people, are marked by forms of hardship more commonly associated with the Global South. Through her observations and reflections, Wang makes clear that housing insecurity, fuel poverty, and period poverty are not isolated surface phenomena. They are all tied, in different ways, to the workings of capitalism. Under capitalism, and especially under neoliberalism, everything is pushed toward the logic of the market. On the surface, this appears as obedience to the rules of the market economy. In reality, however, neither society nor the state can be reduced to the market alone. The market pursues profit, but relations between people, and between the state and the individual, cannot be organized solely according to commercial interest. Human relations require basic warmth, care, and mutual responsibility, and the state owes its citizens a minimum degree of protection. When those in

power govern in the name of following market principles, the ultimate beneficiaries are not ordinary people but capital. It is precisely for this reason that southernization emerges within Britain as part of the capitalist core. The problems Wang records are therefore structural rather than accidental. Seen from this perspective, southernization is not simply another name for poverty in a wealthy country. The internal South of the North complicates any simple opposition between developed North and underdeveloped South, and it demonstrates that capitalist modernity distributes precarity not only across nations, but also within them. To bring the internal South of Britain into conversation with the more familiar Global South is therefore to see more clearly the transnational, systemic, and recurrent nature of inequality under capitalism, especially in its neoliberal form. What emerges is a sharper understanding of how privatization, market rule, and the withdrawal of social responsibility produce comparable forms of vulnerability across very different historical and geographical settings.

At the same time, Wang's work does not end in diagnosis alone. One of its lasting strengths is its attention to the ways in which ordinary people continue to preserve dignity and to care for one another amid damaged conditions. Wang does not reduce vulnerable people to mute victims. Again and again, she allows them their stubbornness, self-respect, awkward pride, and capacity for relation. In this sense, *The Texture of Hard Times* also suggests a limited but meaningful horizon of response. If neoliberal capitalism works by marketizing life, thinning public provision, and individualizing blame, then ordinary care, however modest, remains one of the few practices that resists these effects from below. These minor practices also preserve a space for imagining a more equal, more humane, and more caring future.

Funding

This work was supported by the 2025 National Social Science Foundation Project (Grant Number 25BWW050).

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