The Schumacher Institute

Threads

Alice Mulvaney & Louisa Yeo

This is an exercise in creative writing that contributes to our ‘Narrative Programme’, which looks at how to tell stories derived from mapping a system – in this case revealing the people involved in delivering fashion garments.

It gives us an emotional sense of a system where each part in a chain is only vaguely aware of other parts or the total picture – and no one has any control over that total picture.

The Cotton Farmer – Wei Jun, Xinjiang, China

The sun was low in the sky when Wei Jun dragged a coarse sleeve across his forehead, wiping away the sweat that clung to his skin. The cotton fields stretched before him, their white bolls stark against the dry, cracked soil.

The government quotas had shrunk again. The price of fertilizer had gone up. The water shortages had worsened. None of it surprised him anymore.

His son, Wei Hao, had left two years ago to work in a city factory. **“There’s no future here, Baba,”** he had said, slinging a backpack over his shoulder.

Wei Jun had no answer.

The cotton he harvested would be sold to textile mills, spun into thread, and woven into fabric. It would travel further than he ever would. Some of it would reach Weifang, where Lin Fang’s hands would guide it through the looms, shaping it into shirts and dresses.

And he would wake before dawn to do it all over again.

The Forced Labourer – *Yusuf, Xinjiang, China*

Yusuf woke before the sun. He always did. His children — **twelve and sixteen** — stirred as he gently shook them awake. He looked at their frail limbs, their sunken eyes. He could not free them.

As he knelt to pray, he was thankful for one thing: **at least they weren’t as young as some of the others.** He had heard whispers — children as young as six, working the fields. He had not seen it himself, but he had no reason to doubt it.

His hands trembled as he laced his worn shoes.

The world might call it “employment.” But Yusuf knew the truth. **This was not work. This was servitude.**

And the cotton they harvested? It would be passed up the supply chain—woven into shirts, stitched into designer dresses. People in faraway lands would drape themselves in the fabric of his suffering, oblivious to the prayers whispered over every thread.

He and his children would toil in silence. **And the world would look away.**

The Factory Worker – Lin Fang, Weifang, China

The air inside the factory was thick with the smell of machine oil and fabric dust. Lin Fang moved methodically, guiding the cloth, adjusting the thread, ensuring the looms ran smoothly.

She had worked here for ten years. Her fingers were roughened by fabric, her back bent from the hours. She didn't dream of promotions. There were none. The only certainty was exhaustion.

She had heard of *Roya Hunter* — an executive from *Solaire Fashion*, one of their high-end clients. When Roya arrived that morning, Lin noticed how she walked through the factory, inspecting everything, yet seeing nothing.

For a brief moment, their eyes met.

And something passed between them — unspoken, but heavy.

The Manufacturer – Mr. Zhang, Factory Owner, Weifang, China

Numbers. That's what mattered.

Mr. Zhang knew what the buyers wanted — **low costs, high efficiency, clean audits.** If he didn't meet their demands, there were a dozen other factories that would.

The key was **subcontracting** — passing orders to smaller, unregistered workshops that didn't have to follow the same labour regulations. It was an open secret. The brands didn't ask, and he didn't tell.

At the meeting, he shook hands with Roya Hunter. "Production will remain smooth. Costs will stay low."

He smiled, knowing he had already arranged for half the order to be outsourced to a cheaper factory in the countryside.

The Subcontractor – Liu Min, Unregistered Factory Owner, Rural China

The warehouse was cramped, the air stagnant.

Liu Min's workers were mostly **migrant labourers** — some barely out of their teens. They sewed for **twelve hours a day**, stitching shirts and dresses bound for stores they would never set foot in.

They were paid by the piece, not by the hour. If they slowed down, they earned nothing.

Liu Min had no illusions. This was survival — for him and for them. The factory in Weifang had placed the order, and he had undercut every other bidder.

Speed and cost were all that mattered.

The Social Media Star – *Blake, Los Angeles, USA*

It was a beautiful day in California.

Blake draped herself across the bonnet of her boyfriend's car, tilting her face to catch the sunlight. Her bright red Prada sunglasses gleamed.

This outfit would **go viral**.

Her **millions of followers** on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter ensured she had access to the most exclusive brands — **Prada, Dior, Louis Vuitton**. She had them all.

Her boyfriend — California's most prolific social media photographer — angled the shot perfectly. The light hit just right. Blake's wealth stood out like a diamond in an empty field.

She smiled, knowing that every teenage girl scrolling through her feed would dream of being like her. **Draped in luxury. Worshipped by millions.**

Blake didn't think about where the fabric of her dress came from.

She never had to.

The Protester – Selin, Los Angeles, USA

Just **blocks away** from Blake's mansion, Selin crouched on the pavement, carefully lettering **"STOP UYGHUR FORCED LABOUR"** on a cardboard sign.

Her mother hovered nearby, worried. "Selin, this is dangerous. The government doesn't want people talking about this."

Selin ignored her. She refused to be silent.

Her family was from Xinjiang. She had heard the stories firsthand. The labour camps, the disappearances, the forced sterilizations.

How could the world look away?

The protests were growing. More people were listening. But **would it be enough?**

Would it ever be?

The Retail Worker – Jasmine Carter, Solaire Fashion Store Employee, New York, USA

Jasmine refolded a stack of sweaters for the third time that morning.

The store was sleek, filled with bright lighting, upbeat music, and racks of new arrivals.

She glanced at a dress — a delicate slip, priced at $89.99. The tag read **"Made in China."**

She didn't think about the factory in Weifang, or the teenage workers in an unregistered warehouse. She didn't think about the farmers in Xinjiang or the polluted rivers in Bangladesh.

She just smiled and greeted the next customer.

The Landfill – Jakarta, Indonesia

The dress Olivia had worn once sat in a massive landfill, one of **tons of discarded clothes shipped from the U.S. to Indonesia**.

The fabric — a polyester blend — would never fully decompose.

Some of it would be burned, releasing **toxic fumes** into the air. Some would break down into **microplastics, seeping into the soil and water**.

Rina, a local scavenger, picked through the piles. She searched for anything salvageable - something she could sell, something she could wear.

She found a faded dress, still intact. It looked almost new.

She held it up to the light, not knowing that it had once passed through Lin Fang's hands in Weifang, or that the cotton had been plucked by Wei Jun in the heat of a Xinjiang field.

She only knew that, here at the end of the chain, she had to scavenge to survive.

Final Thoughts – on freedom?

The system was a perfect machine.

- Wei Jun farmed the cotton.
- Yusuf worked under forced labour.
- Lin Fang wove the fabric.
- Mr. Zhang ran the factory.
- Liu Min exploited the loopholes.
- Blake flaunted the luxury.
- Selin protested the injustice.
- Jasmine Carter sold the clothes.
- Rina scavenged the waste.

Each played their part. Each made their choice.

And the process continues.

*The purpose of a system is what it does (POSIWID) - **a systems thinking heuristic** coined by Stafford Beer.*