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Chinese State Media and New Worker Literature on the Picun Migrant Workers Home

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1. Introduction

From the Reform and Opening up of China from 1978 onwards, economic growth took off. Migrants from the countryside provided the manpower needed in the rapidly developing cities at China's coastal areas. By now, around the 244 million people in China are said to be "farmer workers" (农民工) or "precarious workers" (打工者) (Picerni 2020, 148). Instead of these other frequently used terms, I made the choice to refer to these people as "new workers" (新工人). The term new workers originated within a worker's community located in Picun. Picun is a "village in the city" somewhere on the edge of Beijing, and therefore useful to describe these people in this context. A "village in the city" is used to describe a former rural village which is by now incorporated into the city (Picerni 2020, 149). The new worker is a deprived successor to the Mao-era worker who had all kinds of job and housing certainties as part of the so-called "Iron rice bowl". The new worker are seen as the foot soldiers of China's rapid economic growth over the past thirty years and defined as hard-working, low-earning, with little in the way of socio-economic security and often living far away from their place of birth. This terminology is important because the name "rural migrant worker" in particular is a term often seen as offending and reinforcing the subaltern identity of the new workers (Van Crevel 2019, 129-130).

The worker's community in Picun is called the Picun Migrant Workers Home (MWH). The MWH was established in 2002 by three male new workers who came to Beijing in the late 90s. Sun Heng, Wang Dezhi and Xu Duo had all come to Beijing to make their dreams as entertainers come true. However, this dreams quickly faded and the only option was to do what so many young people from the countryside do. While they ended up in jobs such as construction and factory work, volunteer work for an NGO for women migrant workers introduced them to key figures who helped them set up and find funding for the MWH (Van Crevel 2019, 128). They rented an abandoned complex with two buildings and a courtyard in Picun, which lies between fifth and sixth ring of Beijing and close to the international airport. Over the next ten years or so, it turned into a multifaceted organization that undertakes a range of activities. This includes cultural events, especially the annual new worker spring festival which attracts national attention every year (Wei 2015), a primary school for children of new workers and a museum (Van Crevel 2019, 128). Above all, The MWH evolved into a place where new workers can meet to watch movie, sing, read or just play Ping-Pong.

Today, the MWH have certain objectives that the people involved try to accomplish. The aims ascribed to the MWH by human rights scholar Thelle is:

Through culture, to serve and educate the workers; to collect, edit and publish cultural products to benefit the workers; to promote a new culture for the broad masses of the people; and through the media to influence public debate and opinion in order to improve migrant workers' livelihoods and defend their rights and interests (Thelle 2013, 361).

Indeed, culture is an important part of the MWH. Within the MWH, the Picun Literature Group was set up in 2015 by Xiao Fu, a former new worker. Among others, one prominent volunteer teacher is Zhang Huiyu, a scholar from a research institute for film and television. In these classes, new workers get motivated to study, discuss and write their own literature (Picerni 2020, 150). The group meets every week and achieved considerable success with several publication from members in major literature journals, social media attention and within the new worker community (Van Crevel 2019, 129).

The Picun MWH and the Picun Literature Group form the main topics of this thesis. Research on the MWH is more frequent in the last years with studies on new worker's literature and music (van Crevel 2019; Picerni 2020; Fei 2018) and activism (Thelle 2013; Sun 2012; Jakimów 2017).

Nevertheless, the MWH is never studied from the perspective of media representation. New workers as a group, on the other hand, are often researched from the perspective of various media, such as soap operas, news media, talk shows and film (Chu, Bu and Lu 2021; Leung and Liu 2021; Wang 2017; Florence 2018). This thesis is therefore looking to fill this gap with the question; *How is the Picun Migrant Workers Home framed in the Chinese state news media compared to the representation in the selected essays from the Picun Literature Group?*

In this thesis, representation refers to the production of meaning through language or any signifying system (Wang 2017, 29). Studying the representation of this organization in news media through framing theory tells us how certain media frames shape the public debate around a certain topic. These representations of the MWH in news media have real life consequences as it is seen as one the drivers of public opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007, 106). On the basis of a qualitative content analysis of online state news articles and essays from new workers about the MWH, this thesis seeks to identify the frame that is presented on the MWH.

Moreover this thesis tries to problematize the conventional idea of the relationship between Chinese NGOs and the state. In this, it is useful to compare news media frames to the cultural production coming from the MWH. The cultural production by new workers is often about the hardships they experience. I expect that the MWH is represented as a safe harbor or even spiritual place where these people can escape these hardships. If this research concludes that frames in news articles show similarities with this cultural production, it will complicate the image we have of the labour NGO/ state relationship. Although the occurring image is that the state represses these organization (Francheschini and Nesossi 2018), this research can show it is more complex and messier as state news media frames this organization not to be oppositional to the state.

This research is politically charged as NGOs in China are repressed and not supported by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The MWH had its conflict with local state authorities in the past. In 2016 when the power of the complex was shut down in an attempt to expel the people living and working at the MWH. After negotiation talks with the officials, power supply was recovered three days later and things have been relatively quit ever since (Fei 2018, 420-421). Moreover, news media in China is a consciously political topic. Censorship is the rule instead of the exception in China, of course this is particularly true for state media. However, commercial media also suffers from this as self-censorship limits journalists' ideas on what they can or cannot publish. Because the CCP is particularly afraid for news that can cause social mobilization, NGOs remain to be seen as a sensitive topic as they inherently try to mobilize people for their objective. Besides, censorship mainly targets news that contests the CCP's legitimacy of rule (Kuang 2018, 156). NGOs as providers of services and benefits to their target groups can be seen as threat to the state's ability to provide the same type of services to the people.

The outline of this thesis is as follows. The first part provides a literature review on the relevant topics of the NGOs in China, the MWH, new workers in Chinese media and new worker literature. The second and third chapter explains framing theory and elaborates on the methodology. The third chapter is based on the primary research into state newspaper articles and new worker essays and will show the empirical findings. The conclusion addresses limitations and additional comments.

2. Literature Review

This literature review starts with a brief history of rural to urban migration in China. This background is necessary to understand the topics that will be discussed in the literature review as the conditions of this migration resulted in the situations and representations we see today.

2.1 Rural-Urban Migration and Migrant labour in China

To establish the broader background of labour migration in China, which started the processes discussed in the literature, is necessary to make sense of these topics. Along with the economic reforms that the Chinese government implemented after the Mao era, internal migration and urbanization was needed to provide cheap labour for the newly established special economic zones (SEZ) in China's coastal regions.

Arguably the most important obstacle for these migrants is the so called "hukou" system in China. This system, implemented in the 1950s, was meant to restrict individual mobilization from the rural to urban areas. In reality, this means that when a migrant with a rural hukou registration moves to the city, he or she does not enjoy any privileges such as public education, health coverage, subsidized housing and other state-provided benefits (Sun 2020, 115-116). This rather discriminatory system is seen as one of the drivers of the marginalized position new workers occupy in the city. By now there has been a relaxation on certain aspects of the hukou system but many difficulties stayed in place such as the denial of new worker children for public education in the city (Ibid, 116).

New workers get often divided into first generation and second-generation migrant. The first generation moved into the cities during the eighties; their objective was to earn money to eventually move back to their rural village. Second generation new workers were born after the eighties, in the nineties and now increasingly after the turn of the century (Ibid). They enjoy better living condition than their predecessors and are in general better educated, although difficulties must not be underestimated. With some even born in the cities, this second generation has developed a sense of belonging in the cities they grew up or lived for a long time. This makes them unfamiliar with the countryside and unwilling to return in many cases (Ibid, 120).

In terms of job occupation, new worker's most common employments are manufacturing, service and hospitality, construction, scrap collecting, small businesses and domestic work. Some of these jobs are infamous for its long working hours, dangerous working conditions, low wages and precarious contracts that make the lives of new workers insecure and stressful (Ibid, 118).

Many live in some kind of housing provided by the employer. In the case of factory workers this means a large, crowded dormitory complex near the factory (Ibid, 117). In the West, the topic of Chinese new workers became increasingly known through the Foxconn suicides between 2010 and 2013. In this factory that makes electronics for multinationals like Apple in the Pearl River Delta, South China, 18 workers attempted to commit suicide in 2010 alone (Chan, Selden and Ngai 2020, 9).

Living far away from their home village has caused social phenomenon such as left-over children. When both parents choose to work in the city, often as the consequence of unemployment in the village, many leave their children in the village where grandparent normally replace the parents as caretakers. This means a large percentage of the young Chinese generation grows up alienated from their parents who they often see just once a year (Sun 2020, 117).

2.2 Complexity of NGOs and China

There is a consensus in literature that Chinese labour NGOs operate in a rather difficult environment. The topic of activism is sensitive for all labour NGOs in China. The common view of an NGO is that “NGOs are characterized as being voluntary, non-political, nonprofit, self-governing, and in pursuit of social aims (Zhang and Skoric 2019, 397).”

However as Zhang and Skoric (2019, 397) state about the Chinese context; “This definition may not apply in China, however. In general, the Chinese government is not keen on encouraging organized efforts by the public, which potentially could raise political dissent. As a result, the autonomy of NGOs has become a question of debate.”

Since Xi Jinping has been in power, labour NGOs seem to struggle in particular in order to survive and operate (Francheschini and Nesossi 2018, 118). Francheschini and Nesossi (2018, 115) found that repression in the form of “rough” threats of violence, eviction, and criminal punishment has only a partial “chilling effect” on the determination of individual labour activists and on the operations of labour NGOs. In contrast, more “sophisticated” strategies of repression and control such the adoption of new laws and regulations that increase bureaucratic control over NGOs and limit their access to funding have far more serious consequences at both an individual and an organizational level. They saw that the state is moving to more sophisticated strategies over the last years (Francheschini and Nesossi 2018, 116). In addition, these sophisticated methods seem to be more effective as earlier approaches by the state as NGO activists became familiar and, to a certain extent, immune to rough forms of repression (Ibid, 129).

This “switch” in strategy by the state is addressed in other articles as well. Howell (2015, 703) calls this strategy by the government “welfarist incorporation” to maintain the social control. This can be seen as the “sophisticated strategies” explained by Francheschini and Nesossi (2018, 118).

Challenges for labour NGOs in China go beyond the repression by the state. Francheschini (2014, 476) argues that Chinese labour NGOs lack the “social capital” to be a progressive force for political change. Organizations owe this lack to the weak relation they have with both the new workers and the state. Moreover, because the sector is fragmented these organizations cannot engage collectively in sensitive activities.

According Gleiss (2014, 363) gaining legitimacy is the main problem of labour NGOs in China as they face an issue with trust, from both officials and the public. This brings in the problem of *representation by* NGOs. Labour NGOs speak *for* new workers which is hard when the group you seek to represent does not see you as the legitimate representative.

Part of the solution to the legitimacy problem of labour NGOs is given by Yang (2014, 168). It is acknowledged that NGOs in China are having a hard time to establish social credibility. Yang (Ibid) argues that a huge part of the solution lies in media relationships as positive and substantial media reports will help the public understand the mission and values of the NGOs. This makes it more likely to attract high quality staff and funding resources.

These funding resources are crucial for NGOs. Francheschini and Nesossi (2018, 125) argue that the problems of funding are bigger than repression by state. As long as the problem of funding will not be solved, labour NGOs will not make a real difference in China.

While these studies discussed above portray a rather low potential for political change driven by Chinese labour NGOs, Jakimów (2017, 916) and Yang (2014, 170) are more optimistic. Jakimów (2017, 916) argues that “resistance through accommodation” represents a key strategy in the process of ‘citizenship transformation’ in China. This ultimately could be a driver for political change as this strategy implies that labour NGOs adopt official discourse and strategically utilize state

channels to secure their own survival and benefits for new workers. This can be a catalyst for change in the structural characteristics of citizenship, such as discrimination, right limitations and exploitations (Jakimów 2017, 916). Yang (2014, 170) sees a huge potential for labour NGOs in China as press coverage and public discussions of NGO projects could provide a basis for informed public opinion and increase participation in these projects. He therefore sees a bright future for Chinese NGOs.

In sum, labour NGOs operate differently in the China as they get repressed in a more sophisticated way by the government. Apart from the state, establishing social capital, legitimacy, raising funds and a fragmented NGO sector prove to be major obstacles for labour NGOs. While some see low potential for the future, others are more optimistic. The MWH, as a labour NGO situated in Beijing, has to deal with these obstacles. Being fragmented does not necessarily apply to the case of the MWH as Fei (2018, 426) points out that the MWH has ties with labour NGOs both within and outside China. Moreover, representation for new workers does not seem to be an issue for the MWH to the same extent as Gleiss (2014) writes. This is because the MWH is constituted by new workers themselves and not a third, middle/ upper class group that seeks to help the marginalized group of new workers. This is also why it can be said that the social capital problem of Francheschini (2014) mentioned earlier does not fully apply to the MWH. As this research looks into media framing of the MWH, it is positive that scholars argue that media coverage could have the potential for a bright future.

2.3 Picun Migrant Workers Home and Activism

The Picun MWH has become an increasingly popular topic of research over the last couple of years. Thelle (2013) provides an outline of the aims and goals of the MWH. She observes that art serves as a weapon to make the new workers actors of their own problems (Thelle 2013, 365). However, demands remain to be of non-political nature and are rather vague (Ibid, 378). This idea of art as “giving voice” to the new workers by the MWH practices is repeated in different studies, such as van Crevel’s (2019) comparison between a state-run museum and the MWH museum. In the state-run museum in Shenzhen the overall narrative moves from the economic development of China and the migration that it initiated to the new worker experience, in this emphasis is put on success and optimism. In contrast, the Picun museum adds to this narrative the hardships and voices of new workers themselves to show a picture that is more nuanced (Ibid, 138).

The role of activism in the MWH is complex when comparing Thelle’s observation with other studies. Whether the activities of the MWH are considered to be activism or not is highly relevant for this thesis as media frames on an “activists’ organization” can be very different from a “charity organization”. This research can shed an extra light on this question as media representation by state media will probably provide the CCP’s stance on this point.

Part of the answer to the activism question already lies in the literature as it mentions a good relationship between the MWH, state and media. Local state officials and CCP cadres even attend various cultural activities in Picun where they give opening speeches for example (Qiu and Wang 2018, 145). This is somewhat different from the observation that labour NGOs face a distrust and hostility from officials that often end up in fines, evictions and arrests (Gleiss 2014, 363; Francheschini 2018, 111).

Fei (2018) in his article on the music of the New Workers Art Troupe (NWAT), the music band set up by new workers within the MWH, argues that through these songs they attempt to criticize managers and authorities for misconduct and create public consciousness for justice and attention for issues such as left-over children (Fei 2018, 423). This implies concrete actions towards both government

and society, although Fei does acknowledge that the NWAT's impact on society as a whole is still very limited (Fei 2018, 426). His findings go hand in hand with the term "cultural activism" by Sun (2012). Sun (2012, 91) in her research on one of the founders of the MWH, Wang Dezhi, sees him as "radicalized". She links the usage of various media by new workers to "cultural activism" which is explained as the process by which marginal social groups take up a range of media in order to "talk back to structures of power that have erased or distorted their interests and realities" (Ibid, 86). These structures of power in the case of new workers and the MWH is the constant marginalization by state through discriminatory policies, the market which exploit these workers and society who rejects them as citizens of the urban. One of the major discriminatory policies is the Hukou system discussed earlier (Sun 2020, 2). Because the MWH is included in Jakimów's research (2017, 992), he argues that the MWH is actively involved in activism in the form "resistance through accommodation" and therefor reshapes citizenship as mentioned earlier. Although both Jakimów (2017) and Sun (2012) talk about activism, the difference lies in the used channels. While "cultural activism" involves creating own channels to raise a voice, "resistance through accommodation" uses existing state channels to secure survival and built form that point onwards.

On the contrary of taking the stance that the MWH is actively involved in activism, Picerni (2020) leans more towards the side of Thelle. He does not share the idea of explicit activism in poems by new workers from the MWH. He argues that there is no explicit cry for social change (Picerni 2020, 163-164). Picerni follows Pozzana (2019, 194) who sees "rational fatalism" as a characteristic of many new worker literature; this implies a rational admission of suffering which does not produce any social demands (Picerni 2020, 161). This is not to say that there are no poets from Picun that do adopt a more demanding tone in their writing such as Li Wenli who in her poem repeatedly demands for dignity to be granted to the female domestic new worker (Ibid, 164).

In sum, this section deals with the MWH as a topic in the recent academic literature and discusses its activist nature in particular. This because engaging in activism in China might have implications for state news framing. What stands out for this research is that the MWH does not seem to fit the regular observations made on labour NGOs in China, such as a the rather good relationship with the (local) state. Although activism is not seen as the nature of the organization by some, others argue that through the use of culture it seeks to reach certain goals. In spite of this "cultural activism", the objectives are said to lack clarity.

2.4 Media Coverage of Chinese NGOs

When it comes to media representation and Chinese NGOs, not much research has been done. Yet, scholar almost unanimously agree on the importance of the news media for the success of the Chinese NGO (Zhang and Skoric 2021; Gleiss 2014; Yang 2014).

According to Zhang and Skoric (2019, 395), in their research of the media coverage of Chinese environmental NGOs (eNGO), news visibility goes hand in hand with the agenda of the government. Because climate change and environmental degradation is such a hot topic *and* the central government has serious plans to address these problems, these eNGOs get extra media visibility. For this thesis, it has to be said that the topic of labour is much more sensitive on the moment as it is still highly political. This is due to the CCP own origins, which lies in the presentation of itself as the vanguard party for the workers and upholder of social values (Francheschini 2014, 474).

Yang (2014) did research on media framing of NGOs after a massive earthquake in 2008. His findings suggest that after the earthquake, not only did the amount of media coverage about Chinese NGOs increase but also the patterns of coverage changed. Furthermore, the Chinese party media and commercial media demonstrated different coverage patterns. The party media tended to frame the contributions of NGOs as dependent on governmental leadership and downplayed their role in

disaster relief to one of support. The market-oriented media increasingly covered NGOs from multiple angles and depicted them as service providers, decision makers, and resource mobilizers (Yang 2014, 156).

Although it was previously assumed that Governmental Organized NGOs (GONGO) get more media visibility over grassroots NGOs in China, Zhang and Skoric (2019, 406) showed that the media visibility of GONGOs was not significantly different from that received by grassroots NGO. This can be seen as unexpected as a GONGO is a type of NGO which is directly connected to the CCP and therefore are in line with their objectives. On the other hand, grassroots NGOs are set up by people outside the state. These are the type of NGOs that receive the sophisticated strategies discussed earlier. However, this research only engages with visibility and not with framing, so it has nothing to say about the difference between the framing of GONGOs and grassroots NGOs.

In sum, media coverage is crucial for NGOs in China. Media framing is dependent on the political agenda and present events. Moreover, GONGOs and grassroots NGOs show no difference in media visibility. For this thesis, the MWH is therefore not expected to be significantly disadvantaged on state news media visibility. Overall, state media tends to downplay the role of NGOs in providing social services. As this thesis is based on articles from state media outlets, it is possible that this same picture of downplaying occurs. This section shows that research on media representation and Chinese NGOs is still rather limited, this further justifies this thesis on the MWH in state media newspapers.

2.5 Media Coverage of New Workers

In contrast to labour NGOs, much research has been done on the representation of migrant workers in various types of media. Delving into these representations is relevant for this thesis as the Picun MWH is not only an organization *for* new workers, but most of all *by* new workers. While some research is based on the official/ traditional representations, others choose to look at counternarratives.

Florence (2006) compared news articles and official documents. He saw similarities between the 1950s and the 1980s/1990s. The representation in both news- and official documents is much about the denigration of migrant as they were commonly referred to as “blind”, such as in the term “blind migrant” (*Mangliu* 盲流). “Blind” in this case means the disorderly and sometimes irrational way in which peasants left the countryside for the city where they would live as illegal residents, or as metaphor for their blind quest for money (Florence 2006, 4). Florence’s emphasis (2006, 6) is on the homogenizing and “othering” process that takes place in these sources. Moreover, migrants were connected to crime and “ruining the urban environment” (Ibid, 7). Although the term “blind migrant” fell out of use after the 90s in both press and official publications (Ibid, 12), it is not to say that the negative, marginalizing representation of new workers came to an end.

Sun (2004; 2010) in her studies focusses on the female new worker or often called “*dagongmei*” (打工妹) which can be translated to “working sister”. This group is subjected to a double marginalization. First, as being a migrant from the rural to the urban. Secondly due to the traditional position of the woman in Chinese society.

Sun (2004, 111) argues that the representation of the female new worker in both state and commercial media deny her agency and subjectivity. State media tends to presents the stories of the ideal woman that fit the official narrative of the female as virtuous wives and mothers in a patriarchal society, while avoiding sensitive topics like prostitution (Ibid, 113-114). In this way media creates a gap with the reality. However, commercial media does not do a better job according to Sun. To sell newspapers, female new workers are portrayed as a social vagrant. For this reason, stories of working sisters generate sales because they suggest the possibility of moral, cultural, and ideological

transgressions that are not tolerated by the state or represented explicitly even in the commercial media (Ibid, 117).

Passive, voiceless and absence of agency are aspects of the frames of new workers in recent studies as well. Chu, Yu and Lu (2021, 1006) in their research on Chinese soap operas saw a strong stereotyped image of female migrant worker. This starts with the denigration of the Chinese peasant (Ibid, 1008). This filming of the rural and bringing it to the urban audiences, is the same process of “othering” as seen earlier in Florence’s (2006, 6) observations. These women in the soap operas are portrayed as having an unchangeable nature, as losers, victims and incompetent. Overall, the authors call the depiction consistently negative (Chu, Yu and Lu 2021, 1011).

Liu and Leung (2021) in a recent study, focused on a comparison between commercial and official news media. Their findings suggest a unification process in the representation of new workers (Liu and Leung 2021, 2). Commercial media outlets became less critical after 2016 and less focused on voicing the weak as they say; “we can find that the post-2016 commercial and the state media reports are homogeneous in theme, centering around issues such as various official assistance to migrant workers, and the achievements that have been made for solving migrant worker problems (Ibid, 5).” The article does not explicitly mention what event in 2016 changed that commercial media stays away from reporting contentious social issues or criticizing those in power. It could have been due to the adaptation of “sophisticated strategies” to control labour NGOs by the Xi administration (Francheschini and Nesossi 115). Liu and Leung (2021, 7) connect this unification process to the CCP’s ideology of building the “harmonious society”.

For this thesis, these recent developments suggest that the selection of articles about the MWH from commercial media could possibly show no differences compared to state media articles. Yet, these conclusions have to be treated with caution. Wang (2017) in his book focusing on the representation of new workers in news- and other media came across diverging representations. While he (2017, 67) saw a strong traditional narrative as seen in studies mentioned before (Florence 2006; Sun 2004; Chu, Yu and Lu 2021). This traditional narrative frames new workers as the suffering group or as a threat. Key themes that get identified are new workers as in need of help and inferior to urban residents (Wang 2017, 69). Room for the new worker perspective is virtually non-existent. However, the study found that in certain commercial media, with the *Southern Metropolis Daily* as prima example, portray new workers as a local asset in the development of China and report on their social and cultural life (Ibid, 68). In this light, it cannot be taken for granted that commercial and state media articles on the MWH are indeed the same.

Besides the studies discussed above focus on the traditional narrative that frames new workers as voiceless and a problem, counternarratives can be found in the Chinese media environment. In this thesis the writings by new workers from the Picun Literature Group serve as a counternarrative in which the new worker’s own frame of the MWH is expressed. This kind of divergent discourse from the stereotyped frames have been researched by various academics.

Sun (2010) looked at the representation of the so called “baomu”(保姆) or female housekeeper in Chinese television series and in the genre of “Jishi” (纪实), which means something like “true story”. This diverged from the dominant representation as social mobility is a main feature of the plot. However, this cannot be seen as a black/white difference. Social mobility in the drama is linked to the sexual attractiveness of the maid (Sun 2010, 61). This fits the “fetishization” of the female new worker as Sun argued in her previous work (Sun 2004 116). In the “true story” genre real life stories of female maids marrying their oftentimes older bosses are told. In these episodes the women are given the opportunity to put forward their own perspectives (Sun 2010, 66).

An issue that arises from these “true stories” is that of authenticity. Wang (2017, 101) in the chapter on Chinese television talk shows on provincial broadcasters, encountered life stories of new workers as well. New workers are portrayed as positive and striving to succeed while also diligence and frugality are emphasized as characteristics of interviewees. The idea is to make new workers “supernormal” as opposed to mainstream representation as “others” (Wang 2017, 104-105). However, the author strongly questions the authenticity of the stories as they are influenced by the show host and crew in their pursuit to present the desirable facets of the new workers identity (Ibid, 121).

Counternarratives come from within the new worker community itself as well. One of Sun’s protagonists is Wang Dizhe, one of the founders of the MWH (Sun 2012, 89). As mentioned earlier, Sun argues that Wang Dizhe is involved in “cultural activism”. Wang’s main objectives are to narrate the new worker’s experience and raise class-consciousness. In doing so, this representation addresses a gap in mainstream media that creates an alternative space to contest the dominant perspective. This gives voice and authenticity to the narratives of the individuals who occupy the lower classes in society (Ibid, 98).

Florence (2018) wrote about independent film makers. The difference between independent films and the case of Wang Dizhe is that the former are often made by a certain cultural elite that have the resources to engage in this kind of filmmaking. This can bring along the same question on authenticity as seen earlier in the work of Wang (2017, 121). However, the objective remains the same. Giving voice and agency to the new workers to let them tell their stories and individualize their experiences (Florence 2018, 272).

In sum, frames of new workers vary between different times and different outlets, both negative and positive representation have been identified. The traditional narrative is characterized by the depiction of new workers as a problem or threat, as people in need. Other types of media focus on the experience of new workers and bring in their own perspectives. This paints a rather messy picture as there exists variety between, but also within, certain types of media. For this research the distinction between mainstream representation and counter discourses is crucial. While online state-run newspapers serve as mainstream media, the essays from the Picun Literature Group represents the counter discourse. While it is easily assumed that mainstream and counter discourses show clear distinctions, the case of the MWH is argued to be problematizing this assumption.

2.6 Dagong Shige

As the literature review on new workers representations already suggest, counternarratives can be expected to be found in works by new workers themselves. This is what makes the Picun Literature Group valuable for this thesis. The works selected for this thesis from the group belong to the greater genre of “*Dagong Shige*” (打工诗歌) or “migrant workers poetry” which became an object of study on its own. This section seeks to place the used primary sources in the broader context of the genre.

Picerni (2020) states that the genre is highly connected to subalternity. New workers provide a unique perspective which can highlight their own condition of class marginality. This includes the role of new workers as excluded from the city which they, often literally, build themselves. Furthermore, this literature functions as social discourse, says Picerni (2020, 151), as these experiences expressed through poetry and other forms of expression should be read as accounts of the collective as a socially marginalized group. As such, the “I” in new workers literature can be interpreted as “we” or “us”. Writings by new workers often focus on a couple of key themes such as *homesickness* and *loneliness* as they often live far away from their family. Because of this homesickness the *countryside* becomes a frequent theatre in which the writings are situated. In addition to the nostalgic feeling for

the rural village, the *injustice* and *precarity* that the new workers encounter as living on the geographical and social margins of the city is a frequently addressed topic by new workers (Picerni 2020, 155-156).

Although certain overarching themes can be seen as a characteristic of the genre, van Crevel (2019) argues that the genre of *Dagong Shige* is rather hard to grasp. Poets who get counted as new worker poets does not seem to conform to the genre's style. He complicates the idea of the genre through the work of Xu Lizhi, a new worker that committed suicide in a Foxconn factory in 2014. Although Xu Lizhi is seen as one of the poster boys of the genre, his work engages in other themes and style (van Crevel 2019, 89). In this, his writings cannot be read in the collective way to the extent Picerni (2020, 151) suggests.

This shows that while often approached by observers as one genre, this is not a black-white story of what is included and excluded. Boundaries are blurred and eventually the question arises: "who gets to decide?" Yet, overarching features have been identified such as the "I" can be seen as the whole group and returning topics. This justifies the use of the essays from the Picun Literature Group as coherent counter discourse in this thesis.

3. Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory

The following deals with the theoretical framework used to engage with both the newspaper articles and the new worker essays. It furthermore justifies the research into media presentation. It provides examples from the literature review to clarify what the theory means in practice.

Framing theory is used in various media studies (Yang and van Gorp 2019; Guzman 2011; Yang 2014). Scholars usually look at frames to identify trends in issue definitions, compare coverage across media outlets, and examine variations across types of media (Chong and Druckman 2007, 107). According to Entman (1993, 52), framing; "is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." Frames can be identified in textual and visual elements in a text, this includes catchphrases, depictions, keywords, metaphors, stereotypes, appeals, contrasts, charts and graphs (Yang and van Gorp 2019, 607).

This framing process is influenced by various factors. Frames are subjected to the outside pressures of social, individual and ideological structures. At least five factors may potentially influence how journalists frame a given issue: social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists (Scheufele 1999, 109). Dominant ideology of the culture is said to be the most important (Guzman 2016, 81).

In Framing theory, frames are seen as dynamic through a process called "reframing" (Chong and Druckman 2007, 108). Drivers for the reframing process are social and political in nature (Yang and van Gorp 2019, 606). The discussion on the representation of new workers in the Chinese news media fits this idea. Specifically, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Chinese discourse on migrant workers gradually shifted from seeing them as an "floating population" to referring to them as "peasant workers". The migrant worker problem is now articulated in terms of social stability rather than criminality. The positive aspects of migration, such as migrants' economic contributions, are acknowledged. This change is due to the political process in which the CCP wanted to create a new discourse around the new workers (Gleiss 2016, 43). The objective for the CCP to alter the discourse might lie in the broader context of "building a harmonious society" (Liu and Leung 2021, 7). This

concept was introduced by former president Hu Jintao and means that social inequalities have to be reduced and economic growth has to be sustainable (Gleiss 2016, 43). Moreover, it stresses stability and order (Joshi 2012, 175). The discourse defines the problem of new worker in terms of national development. Problems regarding new workers are presented to arise from “bad apples” rather than systematic flaws. Consequently, the treatment recommendation is individual development to improve society as a whole (Gleiss 2016, 45).

Another aspect of framing theory is that multiple frames can co-exist or compete each other (Chong and Druckman 2007, 112). This makes it possible that one issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations (Ibid, 2007, 104). The presence of counternarratives in China through, for example independent films, shows that this idea of competing frames is particularly true for the topic of new workers in China. In this thesis it is expected that the writing from the Picun Literature Group has at least the potential to be a competing frame next to the mainstream frame.

What makes framing theory and the identification of frames in media so important, is the connection between dominant frames and public opinion. This is called “framing effects” (Chong and Druckman 2007, 104). We talk about a framing effect when changes in representation of an issue causes significant changes in opinions (Ibid). Scheufele (1999, 106) therefore states that frames serve as: “the bridge between the larger social and cultural realms and everyday understandings of social interaction.” Framing effects get often connected to the idea of *power*, as a frame can be seen as the imprint of power which registers the actors and interest that dominate the text. This affects how audiences understand the issue (Guzman 2016, 81-82). Thus, news frames on paper or screen have real life consequences. However, as Scheufele (1999, 105) rightly points out, audiences are informed by more than just what they read in the papers or see in the news. Personal experiences and the interaction with others gets complemented by certain aspects that get picked up from the media (Ibid).

The latter aspect is particularly relevant for frame research on Chinese NGOs. Chinese NGOs do not have the authority to exert influence on powerful social actors such as governments or corporations. For this reason, NGOs rely heavily on public opinion to exercise social influence. For NGOs to enjoy long-term development, they need to communicate “a conception of the social problems that they address, and a convincing method for bring about change”. These views underscore the importance of public perceptions of NGOs and their roles in society (Yang 2014, 160). One area of framing research called issue-framing studies, is especially relevant because it investigates “phenomena associated with the strategies and tactics employed by various sociopolitical actors who attempt to shape public perception regarding important issues” (Dardis 2007, 247). Dardis (2007, 249) argued that framing has important implications for studies of NGOs because it reveals the “purposive interpretation of some sociopolitical issue”, and provides cues for the public to understand unknown social actors. Therefore, framing theory offers a useful tool to study the media coverage of Chinese NGOs. Moreover, the social credibility problem (Yang 2014, 168) and legitimacy problem (Gleiss 2014, 363) that are discussed in the literature review make media relationships crucial for the long-term development of Chinese NGOs.

In sum, framing theory is used in multiple similar types of research. Main features of the process of framing of a topic is subjected to certain influences and can change over time. The connection between framing and public opinion is what makes frames relevant for research as a whole, but especially for the case of labour NGOs as positive public attitude is seen as crucial for their survival.

4. Methodology

This section provides insights into the methods of collecting and analyzing the data. The qualitative content analysis is explained and critiques on this method are discussed. Moreover, it says something about subaltern literature and the Chinese to English translation process.

4.1 Data

The data for this thesis consist of three essays from members of the Picun Literature Group and fourteen articles from four state-media online newspapers. These newspapers are The People's Daily, China Daily, The Southern Weekly and the China Youth Daily. The criteria for these newspapers are that they have to be state-owned and have at least one result after 2015. Results after 2015 are used because processes identified in the literature review, such as the switch from rough to sophisticated strategies (Francheschini and Nesossi 2018) and homogenization between state and commercial news media (Liu and Leung 2020), are in play from that year. Other Chinese state-run newspapers were also included in the data collection process like Xinhua and Global Times, but the search terms did not show any results. These newspapers were analyzed in the Chinese version, the issue of translation will be addressed later in this section.

The search term used is “工友之家” as this is the official Chinese name of the MWH. Not all results were useful. Since these four website-based newspapers share the state as common factor, they sometimes reproduce each other's articles. For example, from the fifth teen results on China Daily, only seven were used in the analysis. These articles include a variety of structures from regular news reports on an event to interviews and accounts of visits to the MWH. The length of the articles vary between 1100 Chinese characters being the shortest and 8000 being the longest. The oldest article is from February 2015 and the most recent from December 2020.

The essays were retrieved of the Modern Chinese Literature and Culture (MCLC) website which contains a large database on academic and translated literature. The three pieces used are *My first trip to Picun* by Wan Huashan, *Eating in Picun* by Ma Dayong and *My name is Fan Yusu* by Fan Yusu. The criteria for the selection were that they had to be written within the Picun Literature Group and make references to Picun and/or the MWH. These essays are published in translation between 2017 and 2019, this means it fits within the time frame adopted for the news articles. As these essays are part of migrant worker poetry, they are categorized under subaltern literature. According to Yi:

Subaltern literature primarily takes excluded and disempowered social groups as its subject. Subaltern literature demonstrates a reflective and critical attitude toward reality by focusing on the lives of lower-class people, raising questions, and generating critical awareness in the hopes of helping the masses understand their social and economic circumstances (Yi 2015, 53)

The goal of subaltern literature is to tell their stories and give the subaltern voice (Ibid, 52). This is evident from the discussion on migrant worker poetry earlier as it is observed that new workers express their experiences of loneliness, homesickness and other hardships (Picerni 2020, 155-156). Subaltern literature causes people to expand their minds, allowing them to recognize the unjust aspects of society and thereby raising the possibility of changing the status quo. This is the function of what is called the “awakening process” (Yi 2015, 70). It therefore that subaltern literature is often praised for its social significance (Ibid, 62). In China it is true that migrant worker poetry is often connected to its social significance (van Crevel 2019, 89).

4.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

A qualitative content analysis (QCA) is adapted to analyze the data. Studies using QCA focus on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the context or contextual meaning of the text (Dai and Jiang 2018, 74). In this thesis QCA is understood as a “research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of the text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). In this, an inductive approach is adapted as categories flow from the data instead of using preconceived categories.

First, each article was checked on relevance. This was necessary due to the already mentioned issue that state-run newspapers tend to reproduce each other articles. Secondly, the articles were read as a whole and translated. During this process relevant quotes, depictions, keywords, metaphors and contrasts were highlighted. From this process labels and codes emerged. These codes were then analyzed for similarities and differences and translated into themes. “Themes” in this thesis are described as the unifying ‘red thread’ running through the data that brings meaning to a recurrent topic or experiences and its various manifestations induction (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017, 32). A theme, then, following this description is similar to a frame in framing theory. The same process has been utilized for the three essays, apart from the translation as it was already available in English.

QCA is criticized for offering subjective analyses and cherry-picking texts to support the argument (Liu and Leung 2021, 3). However, this is not a problem for this research as selecting articles happened under rigorous criteria. In addition, since this research is inductive rather than deductive there is no specific argument to be proven. Using this inductive approach is criticized as well. There may be a risk of getting stuck in the surface structures of recurrent empirical summaries, and thus becoming a prisoner of induction (Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017, 30). The process of renegotiation of data and findings must solve this issue.

Another critique is that QCA is limited in both theory development and description of the lived experience, because both sampling and analysis procedures make the theoretical relationship between concepts difficult to infer from findings (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1281). Although this research is embedded in the existing theory of framing, it is not its aim to further develop theories. This makes QCA a valid approach to answer the research question.

4.3 Translation

Since the articles used for analysis are translated in order to clarify the findings it is necessary to identify some central issues in the process of translation in general. In translation studies, language is perceived as inseparable from culture (Bassnett 2012, 15). This means that some words or sentences have a different meaning when they appear in a different cultural context. This is true for Chinese-English translation as cultural differences have created different linguistic solutions to create meaning to objects, actions and concepts. For this reason, the stance is taken that exact translation is merely impossible (Ibid, 32). This “untranslatability” is on a linguistic level, it is possible to translate meaning into the preferred language (Ibid, 40). Furthermore, words and meaning can literally get lost in translation during the process. This seems to be particularly true for news media translation. In transferring news across cultures, social, legal and linguistic conventions can radically change how it is presented as it can alter the emphasis (Bassnett 2011, 135).

Different translators make different choices. Some translators have declared their intention to be absolutely faithful to an original, while others have announced that they feel free to take the liberties necessary to produce a good result. Some translators prioritize the original author, others put their

readers first (Bassnett 2011, 8). For this thesis, I choose to keep as close as possible to the source text and provide cultural context when needed.

5. Findings

This section outlines the main findings of the thesis. It starts with the analysis of the new worker literature by Wan, Ma and Fan. Thereafter, the analysis of the articles from the People's Daily, China Daily, The Southern Weekly and the China Youth Daily are compared to the first findings. Framing theory is applied to identify which particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation is promoted. Moreover, it helps to focus on textual and visual elements in a text, this includes catchphrases, depictions, keywords, metaphors, stereotypes, appeals, contrasts, charts and graphs that carry the frame. The frame/theme that is highlighted through this analysis is that of the MWH as the "holy land" for new workers, aspects of this frame are resilient, sense of community and supportive.

5.1 New Worker Literature Analysis

Wan Huashan piece is called *My first trip to Picun*. Wan is originally from the western province Hunan. After he dropped out of school he moved to Beijing and had jobs in factories before he became a member of the Picun Literature Group (Paper Republic 2022). The story is autobiographical and tells Wan's experience of the first time he went to Picun. The encounter with Picun through the meeting with Xiaohai, another new worker connected to the MWH, serves as an almost life changing event. Before going to Picun, Wan worked in a district in Beijing called Zhongguancun. In the beginning of the essay this place is associated with the prosperous side of the city. However this is not what Wan experiences as he describes this episode of his life as:

"During that time, I often felt I was living in a world of isolation, like an alien creature suddenly beamed down to earth."

This is in line with the discussed topics that appear in new workers writings, such as loneliness, isolation and homesickness (Picerni 2020, 155). Then Xiaohai comes into the story. Xiaohai is the penname of Hu Liushi and a new worker originally from Henan Province (Ibid, 159). He is named a promising poet who gained appreciation in and outside the new workers community and a protagonist of various scholars as he is "bouncy and hip" and appeared in *Iron Moon*, a considerably famous Chinese film about new worker's poetry (van Crevel 2019, 140). Moreover, Xiaohai's poetry is seen as special due to his engagement with foreign literature combined with local issues and injustice (Ibid, 141). Xiaohai wants Wan to come to Picun and visit the MWH which he refers to as his "holy land".

At first Wan writes about Picun as the opposite of Zhongguancun;

"A burst of winter rain had left the ground swampy, with little puddles dotted around. One false step, and your leg was mud-spattered. Wandering this landscape, like nothing I'd seen before, I felt I didn't know who or where I was. On one hand, the bustle of traffic; on the other, wilderness in all directions."

In contrast to the modern side of Beijing, Picun is described as "muddy", "cheap", "dirty" and even "primeval" as Wan asks himself the question;

"Who could have imagined something so dilapidated might exist in our prosperous capital city?"

Not yet the holy land Xiaohai had promised, but the second part of the story the image of Picun changes due to the MWH. At the time Wan went to Picun for the first time he hears the sound of machineries outside the walls of the MWH who aimed to tear the place down. This event took place in the winter of 2016/2017 as it addressed to in scholarly works as well (Fei 2018, 420). This surrounding did not hinder Wan from feeling the specialness of the place as he writes;

“There were no boundaries here, no restrictions. I felt as if, for once, I’d managed to shake off my loneliness. In a bid to recover the energy of my youth, I said a lot of big things, most of them irrelevant.”

This is the kind of depiction, metaphor and appeal that make the frame of the MWH as the supportive community. Now the idea of what the MWH wants to be is getting room in the essay, namely serve as a community and safe place for new workers.

During Wan’s visit there happens to be a small concert at the theatre in the MWH. Because the power was shut down it was freezingly cold and dark in the theatre. This concert puts forwards the MWH’s focus on cultural activities as it consisted of new workers- poets, singers and folk opera performers. This creates the frame of the MWH as a flexible and resilient as the creativity of the performers change the situation. It seems that this concert gives Wan the last push to acknowledge the MWH as a “holy land”. The last two paragraphs of the story shows this contrast of the MWH as the communal, resilient and positive place Wan did not expect to find here;

“The concert ended, and the workers of Picun brought their children home, but the admirers who’d come from afar weren’t satisfied yet. “Encore! Encore!” Xu Duo picked up his guitar again, but unluckily, the electricity cut out just then, and the room plunged into silence and darkness. A sort of helpless sorrow crept into my heart. Then someone turned on their phone flashlight, and others followed suit. Soon, the stage was bright again. “Life is a battlefield.” Everyone held up their phones and enveloped him in their glow.”

“In that wavering light, my heart stirred. My journey from Zhongguancun to Picun meant stepping from a clean, prosperous area into a patch of mud, yet what tenderness was in that mud, so many hands to be clasped. Amidst the blaze of song, I couldn’t help recalling how, aged seventeen, I’d entered the world of work, and the difficult road I’d walked since, drifting through unfamiliar territory, constantly isolated with no one to depend on. Today, I had finally found my companions, my community.”

The flashlight scene underscores the resilience of the MWH. The last paragraph underscores the positive transition Wan made to go to Picun and the place as a close community. As we follow the stance by Picerni (2020, 151) that new workers writing can be read as the experience of the collective, then the MWH serves as a “holy land” in the lives of many new workers.

Ma Dayong, in his story *Eating in Picun* is much less focused on the MWH perse but engages with the same frames as we found in the piece by Wan. The topic of homesickness is very present in Ma’s story as he opens;

“When you live away from home, food becomes something you have to deal with every day. Each person’s stomach has its own set of regulations and signals for hunger. Your body slackens and you have no energy, until you fill your belly. Food is the god of the masses.”

He goes on with a description of Picun which is similar to Wan’s view. Picun is “messy”, “busy” and lively” and new workers make up for most of the residents. Picun as a community is explained through Ma’s encounters with various restaurants in the center of the village;

“They gave every single customer a warm welcome, and were easy-going as anything. Once I forgot my wallet, and didn’t realize till the food arrived. I was just saying, “I have to go get my...” when the wife interrupted, “No need, no need, eat first! You can pay us tomorrow.”

This depiction of mutual trust of people maybe originating thousands of kilometers away is an indication of the communal feeling in Picun that is promoted by the MWH. However, the story has a rather sad end as the injustice and precariousness, also topics addressed by Picerni (2020), come to the foreground;

“As I paid, I said to them, “Why don’t you install air-conditioning?”

“Oh, we earn so little, we can’t afford that,” the husband sighed. His wife came over and handed me a box of food. “Here, take this with you. We’re closing tomorrow.”

Sure enough, the little restaurant’s doors remained firmly shut the next day. Not long after that, builders were busy transforming the space. Yet another eating place would open there soon.”

Although this is not Picun portrayed as the explicit “holy land” seen in Wan’s experience, it does frame Picun as a community in which new workers seem to find a sense of belonging.

The last essay is *I am Fan Yusu* written by Fan Yusu. This is the most famous writing from a member of the Picun Literature Group. Fan became an overnight literary sensation in 2017 when her autobiographical story gained attention on Noonstory, a Chinese social media platform. The essay is considerably longer than the previous two and is not only situated in Picun.

The story begins with Fan’s youth in rural Hubei. She talks about her mother, father and siblings. She talks about her fascination for literature she develops in her childhood. A reoccurring theme is the inequality between men and woman in the traditional minded countryside Fan grew up. She has two children from her husband who became an alcoholic. After Fan becomes a victim of her husband’s violence, she decides to return to her hometown. Although her mother is willing to help her, the paternal tradition of rural China makes the eldest brother decide she was not welcome anymore. This is the moment Fan moves to Picun where she becomes a nanny for a rich family. The double marginalization of female new workers discussed in the literature review is evident in Fan’s essay as she suffers from the male domination of both her bother and alcoholic husband.

From the fifth section onwards, Picun plays a bigger role in the story as Fan calls Picun a very interesting village. She writes about Guo Fulai who is also a member of the Picun Literature Group. This is the only time Fan mentions a friend. This might be the same experience as Wan Huashan had with Xiaohai, although Fan is not as explicit on this relationship as Wan. About the MWH she mentions that;

“It expressed the voice of the migrant workers”

This is part of the actual aim of the MWH, this quote shows that the MWH’s approach is bearing fruits. More specifically on the Picun Literature Group, Fan describes how attending for one year changed her;

“Before I never wrote essays, I barely went to school and I have no confidence”

The MWH in one way or another gave her this confidence to write her experiences down. Fan is rather short about her experience at the MWH because she had to see her youngest daughter once a week on that day. As she stops going to the MWH, Fan writes that she could no longer trust people

and was even afraid to greet people. Although it seems that the MWH was the trigger for Fan to write down this essay and give her the confidence to post it, it does not play a significant role. In support of the “holy land” frame, the only time Fan mentions a friend, Guo Fulai, is someone she met through the Literature Group. She decides to emphasize this contrast after leaving the MWH:

“All my contact were quite superficial and sometimes I was even afraid to greet people”

After the section that deals with the MWH. Although not explicitly mentioned, the lack of the community sense felt at the MWH could at least worsened those feelings.

In conclusion, the frame that occurs from these writing is that of the MWH as the “holy land”, the term used by Wan Huashan. This is characterized Picun as a community which is resilient and supportive to new workers. This term as explained above, combined the three stories in one frame to a certain extent. Fan’s essay is the least explicit of the three, so what accounts for the conflicting experience of Fan? This might be the result of her experience as female new worker and the double marginalization that shapes her story. This “holy land” frame has the potential to shape public perception towards labour NGOs in general as the essays show that NGOs have an impact on individuals instead of downplaying NGOs achievement which is done in state media (Yang 2014, 156). This is part of the “awaking process” because the public view could switch from new workers as threat or problem, towards people who do their utmost to succeed in an extremely difficult environment. When it comes to activism, Wan, Ma and Fan comply with Picerni’s findings which argue that there is an absence of an explicit cry for social change (Picerni 2020, 163-164).

5.2 News Articles Analysis

The articles that mention the MWH are focused around certain events. Firstly, Fan Yusu going viral with her article “My Name is Fan Yusu” in 2017. This resulted in a lot of media attention for both the person Fan Yusu as their background at the MWH. Secondly, every year around Chinese New Year the annual “New Worker Spring Festival” is held at the MWH. This includes the report of the house eviction the MWH had to endure in 2016, which happened during the preparation of the festival. Thirdly, multiple articles deal with the struggles and obstacles second generation new workers encounter in the city of Beijing.

Other articles (1, 2 and 14) did not fit the overarching topics as identified above. For example, article 2 is about a charity program by GOME Electronics in collaboration with the MWH to give warm clothes and stuffed animals to children of new workers in Picun and other places. The MWH is only mentioned once. This article complies with the traditional frame of new workers in need and downplaying the contribution of the MWH. This exemplifies an overall finding that when outsiders of the new worker culture talk about the organization, the MWH gets significantly less attention in comparison to other articles.

Two main figures of the MWH are present in the articles. Wang Dezhi serves as main representative of the organization, as he is one of the founders and an active artist/ activist himself. Before establishing the MWH, he was a new worker himself. As stressed before, this creates legitimacy and social capital for the MWH among the new worker community. In addition to Wang, the mentor of the Picun Literature Group Zhang Huiyu figures in multiple articles. As mentioned before, Zhang is a scholar of art and film at Peking University. As “outsider” to the new workers community he serves as a sort of bridge between the new workers writers and Beijing cultural establishment (Picerni 2020, 151). Zhang is mainly connected to the meteoric rise of Fan Yusu, while Wang is involved in the organization of the annual New Workers Spring Festival. Sun Heng, one of the other two founders of the MWH is also mentioned in one article.

In contrast to Liu and Leung's (2021, 5) argument that news media is decreasingly voicing the weak, the structure of the majority of the news articles evolves around the first-hand stories or interviews of new workers. This goes against the prejudice that state media denies agency and subjectivity (Sun 2004, 111). In this way, the first similarity between the new worker literature and state media news articles is identified. Both are the "words" of the new worker him/herself and therefore acknowledges both agency and subjectivity since they are able to share their own story and perspective. Yet, while new worker in their writings are free to say what they want, journalists shape the conversation in state news reports with their questions and the five factors of influence according to framing theory (Yang and van Gorp 2019, 607). This means it is not exactly the same.

When it comes to the framing of the MWH, the term "holy land" as explained from the essay by Wan Huashan is taken as a red thread leading through the articles. This frame presents Picun as a community which is resilient and as a place where new workers find a sense of belonging to develop as individuals. Naturally, some articles are more explicit than others on the presentation of the MWH as this "holy land". This analysis is addressed in the following section.

5.3 Picun Migrant Workers Home as *Holy Land*

Fan Yusu went Viral

In total three articles (4, 12, 13) deal with the sudden rise to fame of Fan Yusu after her publication of the essay engaged with earlier.

The main take away from these articles is that the MWH in the person of Zhang is seen as the main motivator for writing. Maybe surprisingly is the finding that the role of the MWH and Zhang is much more present in her interviews than it is in her essay:

Journalist: Many people think you have a special literately gift, what do you think?

Fan: no way, I think it is my teacher with this gift, Zhang Huiyu (volunteer at MWH)

Journalist: In the writing process who influenced you the most?

Fan: Zhang Huiyu, also other minor contributors. I received much help, he taught me how to write, how to start and end, let me pick up many books, all in order to let us increase our writing accomplishments and self-cultivation. I almost did not receive any education and have not studied. Master Zhang taught me how to write an essay" (4)

This also reflects on the MWH aim to serve and educate workers and to establish a new worker culture that can improve the people's livelihood. Although importance of MWH is stressed, the individuality of Fan is remained:

"In the eyes of the Picun MWH literature group's person in charge Fu Qihui, Fan Yusu not only reads especially much, her memory is also very good. Fan Yusu is not very familiar with the computer, most of her work is written by hand. With the help of Fu Qihui she typed the electronical version." (4)

This underlines the MWH emphasis on new worker's own agency and the MWH as the provider of the infrastructure to put this agency in play.

In an interview with Zhang about popularity of Fan's writing he underlines the frame of the MWH as this open space to develop and dream, or as Wan puts it: "There were no boundaries here, no restrictions. I felt as if, for once, I'd managed to shake off my loneliness." It is this environment that is given as the partial reason why Fan story unfolded as it did:

“Journalist: What do you think is the reason Fan Yusu became so popular?”

Zhang: On the one hand it is her literature capabilities, the other hand the atmosphere of the Literature Group that drove her to write down these words.”

These examples from the articles on Fan Yusu show that instead of journalists writing their own thoughts on the MWH, they let Fan and Zhang share their own perspective. This sheds light on the agency and subjectivity of workers and emphasis on the MWH's role in the process. The presentation of the MWH as “holy land” is more explicit in these news articles than in her essay. In addition, it highlights, rather than downplays, the MWH support of new workers and does focus on the voice of the new worker.

New Worker Spring Festival

Articles 6, 8, 9 share the topic of the New Worker Spring Festival. Picun and the MWH as a community is characterized by its resilience. This is present in the articles that were published during the New Workers Spring Festival and the dispute with the landlord and local authorities. Just as in the articles on Fan Yusu and Zhang Huiyu, cultural practices as poetry are the main focus when it comes to the representation of the MWH. This emphasis changes new workers from trouble makers and threat to artist, poets and creatives. This touches upon the topic of inequality which characterizes the new worker experience. The engagement with new worker artists and support for new worker culture is what makes the organization special in article 8:

“This is a special Spring Festival. A few dozen outstanding worker poets from all over the country gather for the first time to read their poetry out loud. This is not the same as common poetry meetings. This time it is not in a lecture hall, bookshop or coffeeshop, but it is located at the MWH in Picun which lies between the fifth and sixth ring of Beijing. Here is also the starting ground of the third time held New Workers Spring Festival.” (8)

Another way in which cultural activities is placed on the foreground is by starting with a piece of song text from the New Workers Art Troupe:

“You come from Sichuan, I come from Henan, you come from Dongbei, he comes from Anhui, no matter where we come from, we all have to rely on work to live. No matter in what ways we manage, in order to survive we walk together.” By Sun Heng in All workers of the world are one family.” (9)

Later in this same article, Sun Heng explicitly mentions the intention of the MWH which makes the place a supportive community:

“In the interpretation of a scholar of the difference between a new worker and a peasant worker embodies the thirst for workers from outside to blend into the city. But in the eyes of Sun Heng, the original intention of the MWH is very simple: make worker friends.” (9)

Apart from the focus on music, this quote enforces the frame of Picun as a community. Above all new workers subjectivity is immediately brought into the light as the title of article 9 is: “We sing our own song”.

The MWH as an open place for everyone is further expressed by the account of the festival:

“Among the low sitting workers, poets and literary critics there are also strangers who joined the fundraising and helped this movement get donations. The worker poets brought along their own local accents to read their poems. As for these poems; some are written about well-

known state-run factories, some come from the coal mines, construction, also many write about the assembly workshop. This is the first full digitalized poetry meeting, the whole process is broadcasted on the website, there are many people who watch the whole meeting from their computer.” (9)

That the evening is broadcasted online signifies the growth and popularity of the MWH. This addresses some of the earlier mentioned issues like legitimacy and social capital. Article 6 has the title “New Workers Spring festival set up base has to move” and was written in December 2016. At the time power was shut down by local authorities. Although the news report suggests a degree of certainty that the move was going to happen, more recent sources confirm that after three days electricity was back on and the organization could continue their operations in the building (Fei 2018, 420). Again, the MWH as a strong community and the support for new workers is stressed:

“At the courtyard of the MWH, the museum, the theatre, cinema everyone’s need, normally worker friends gather here to dance, play Ping-Pong, watch movies, sing, read, this is almost their only relaxation in life. From the shutdown onwards, many activities were forced to stop.”(6)

Just like Wan’s account of this event, the new media presents the MWH as a place that does not give up easily due to this unforeseen issue. In the person of Wang Dezhi, who is interviewed, this is written as followed:

“Many of the creators and actors of the New Workers Spring Festival have been promoting the program and raising funds since December. We already found sponsors. This year for the first time we made a program of workers gathered from all over the country. Under these circumstances, it looks like if it is hanging on a thread, but I will continue to persevere. Many people who have had a cold for more than a week still show a glimmer of hope and confidence in the New Worker Spring Festival. It’s actually very important to build this platform to give everyone a chance to communicate, even if it’s just chatting.” (6)

This highlighting of the positive influences such as creating sense of belonging and providing services further fits the Holy Land frame.

Second Generation New Workers as the “inbetweeners”

Articles 3, 5, 7 and 10 are about new workers and the shared challenges they face in their everyday lives. This deals with of topics of injustice and precarity. The articles are structured around first-hand stories of new workers that voice their grievances of living in the city as a marginalized group. Second generation new workers often do not feel part of the city they grew up in, while they also lack familiarity with the rural village of their parents. This this group is rereferred to as “inbetweeners”. One of the workers that shares his story is MWH founder Wang Dezhi:

“Wang Dezhi is one of the founders of the group (Picun Picture Group), he is also one of the organizers of the Picun MWH. When he came to Beijing, he was 18 and had several jobs. He experienced two military parades and the Olympic games, he witnessed how the housing prices in Beijing rose to several ten thousand Yuan per square meter, the metro changed into two-lanes, skyscrapers became higher and higher and there were more and more cars. Wang Dezhi calls himself generation 1.5. He lives in an apartment that is not even 10 square meters, one half is bed, the other half bookcase. His son is born and raised in Beijing, yet he is mocked as being only a temporal resident. He always loves to shoot films and targets his lens at the

second-generation workers. In 2016, he and Song Yi completed the play “second generation immigrants” and the documentary “collection of weeds.” (5)

This frames the MWH as the organization *by* new workers as addressed earlier in the literature review on the topics of legitimacy and social capital. Moreover cultural activities, in this case documentaries, are highlighted again which makes new worker artists instead of a threat or problem. The connection between these cultural activities and the higher aim of the MWH is further addressed:

“Song Yi hopes that the documentary can become a bridge, and create more understanding about the line of thought of second-generation migrant workers. He says; when the cities policymakers are making plans and do not think it is their problem, then we must first establish a joint basis.” (5)

The metaphor of a bridge is a nice indicator of the MWH as supportive community for new workers. The documentary serves the purpose of the awaking process which is also present in the new worker literature. These quotes present the MWH as a place *for* and *by* new workers as Wang and Song Yi stand within the new worker community. This deals with representation of new workers by the MWH as it creates legitimacy.

In brief, the articles are focused around three main topics. These are Fan Yusu, the New Worker Spring Festival and the second-generation new workers and their experiences in the city. The majority of the articles include first hand stories of either new workers or volunteers from the MWH. It is argued that the MWH as a “holy land” is represented in the Picun literature and the state media news articles. This shed another light on the state-labour NGO relationship in China, which is believed to be characterized by suppression of the latter. These findings suggest that, for the case of the MWH, the state through media has a positive attitude towards this particular organization. The question arises what accounts for this difference of the case of the MWH? It might be the lack of explicit social demands of the organization as discussed earlier. Moreover, their focus on cultural activities instead of legal operations could make them less of a threat than other labour NGOs.

To connect this to framing theory, this kind of media representation has the potential to create a positive public attitude towards labour NGOs. What is the objective for state media to put forward this frame? Although repression under president Xi is said to have increased (Francheschini and Nesossi 2018, 118), it seems that the discourse of a “harmonious society” which seeks stability and order informs the news framing on the MWH (Joshi 2012, 175). New workers in the context of the MWH are included in Chinese society and put forward on a positive way to achieve this social stability. Because we do not know what is really inside the heads of the CCP’s leadership, this answer is far from definite. For this thesis, however, the “harmonious society” discourse is taken as a possible reason why the CCP supports the resilience, community, supportive frame of the MWH as also seen in the Picun literature. This case shows that the dichotomy of state/civil society in is rather messy than often portrayed. The combination of cultural practices like those undertaken by the Picun Literature Group and the room for new worker experiences in state media provides a basis for a future with an increasing influence of labour NGOs in China.

6. Conclusion

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP no longer sees the benefits that labour NGOs can bring to society and are determined to weaken their operations (Francheschini and Nesossi 2018, 129). In this thesis I conducted a QCA on three new worker literature pieces from the Picun Literature Group and compared them with Chinese state media news articles from four different online newspapers to answer the question; *How is the Picun Migrant Workers Home framed in the Chinese state news media compared to the representation in the selected essays from the Picun Literature Group?* My findings prove that the picture of the relationship between labour NGO and Chinese state is less of a black-white story. Framing theory was incorporated to show why media research is such an important field as it has the potential to shape the public debate. This public approval is crucial for the survival of labour NGOs in the Chinese context (Yang 2014, 160). The analyses suggest that state media framing of the MWH shares strong similarities with the frame in the new workers literature. I suggest the frame of the MWH as “holy land”, the term used by Wan Huashan. The main aspects of this frame is Picun as a community which is resilient and as a place where new workers find a sense of belonging to develop as individuals. Furthermore, state media present first hand stories told by new workers instead of journalist writing about them. This can be seen as a surprise, as the existing literature characterized state media as denying new workers agency and subjectivity (Sun 2004, 111; Liu and Leung’s 2021, 5). The objective for the state in put forward this frame is connected to the Chinese idea of “harmonious society”.

These findings have to be understood within the limitations of this thesis. The Picun MWH is considered to be a unique organization because of its approach. Therefore, it does not necessarily reflect the experiences of labour NGOs in China in general. Moreover, a small number of articles have been researched and only one labour NGO is included in this thesis. Therefore, I must be cautious to make general statements. For me, the largest obstacle for this research was that all my knowledge on Chinese labour NGOs, the MWH and the Picun Literature Group comes from second hand accounts. To develop a broader understanding of these processes and interaction between actors I would have to travel to Picun and look how this works out on the ground. This is what further research must be based on, go to Picun and map these interactions with state, media, new workers and the rest of society in order to develop a deeper understanding of what this, and other organizations mean in the Chinese context.

Within the field of Chinese civil society, this thesis is a reminder of the messiness of the relationship between state and public. In contrast to the often-presented oppositional dichotomy, Chinese state and civil society show much overlap (Jakimów 2017, 929). The MWH, thus, contests the conventional ideas on how NGOs work in the Chinese society. The organization might be a driving force for broader connections between new workers and state, and ultimately foster social change. Before this proves to be the true, the work of the MWH must change into the construction of a self-sufficient community in terms of economy, culture and organization (Kuo 2017, 967). Media visibility and positive framing is proved to be crucial for the development of NGOs. Therefore, media research does not have to be forgotten in the research on civil actors. The effects of the developments discussed will literally influence millions of people across China. How extraordinary it is that, in Wan Huashan’s words, this patch of mud what is called Picun might be at the center of this change.

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