Migrant Worker Literature and Censorship in China: The Case of Picun Literature Group

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MA Thesis

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Word Count: 15000 (excluding the tables and the appendix)

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1. Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) heavily censors media, literature, and art. Labor issues, particularly those involving migrant workers, frequently trigger censorship (Liu and Leung, 2021, 4-5). Migrant workers often face harsh conditions and low wages and their demands and stories about their lives are frequently censored (Zhou, 2017; Yuan, 2022). However, one grassroots migrant worker organization, Migrant Workers' Home (Gongyou zhi jia 工友之家; "the Home" hereafter) located in Picun, Beijing, has been successful in creating its own space where migrant workers' stories can be shared.

The Home is a non-governmental organization (NGO) established by migrant workers who arrived in Beijing during the 1990s aspiring to pursue careers in entertainment. However, due to market-oriented policies, like other migrant workers, they found themselves in precarious living and working conditions at construction sites and factories, lacking socio-economic security. Eventually, they connected with an NGO for women migrant workers through volunteer work. With their assistance, they established the Home (van Crevel 2019, 128).

The Home aims to protect migrant workers' rights by providing various services, such as legal advice to migrant communities and by building "culture" for migrant workers. Cultural production and cultural self-awareness are central to the activities of the Home. One of the founders of the Home, Wang Dezhi says in an interview: "As workers, it is important for us to recognize the significance of having our own culture that resonates with us. When we perceive a culture as relevant, it has the potential to influence our destiny because culture holds power" (Ting and Bohnenkamp, 2023, 513). By encouraging cultural engagement, it aims to bolster migrants' self-esteem and societal standing (Thelle, 2013, 358, van Crevel, 2019, 128). The Home has a comprehensive understanding of culture and strives for social empowerment, labor rights, and gender equality awareness (*ibid*).

One of its cultural initiatives is Picun Literature Group ("the Group" hereafter). The Group publishes essays about migrant workers. These essays are privately produced, and unofficial publications outside of the state publication system (van Crevel, 2019, 130). They mostly feature migrant workers' personal stories, challenges they face in urban areas, and the inequalities they

encounter. Some essays also criticize the government. These self-narratives contrast with the state and media's portrayal of migrant workers. Despite this discrepancy, these publications are not subject to censorship.

The Group's publications and the CCP's censorship are central themes of this thesis. Literature in China plays a significant role in shaping political discourse and addressing social and political concerns. It gives voice to marginalized groups and provides a platform for critiquing corruption, censorship, and environmental degradation (Laughlin, 2002, 111-113). It is also used by politicians and academics to engage with these issues (Hockx, 2015, 17). Beyond its political function, literature also serves as a source of entertainment, contributing to a thriving publishing industry (*ibid*).

Due to its influential role and the importance traditionally attached to it (Denton 2016, 229; or Idema & Haft 1997, 8-11), literature is often subject to censorship in China. During the high-socialist era, China implemented a literary control system to establish a strong connection between the top leadership and readers (Link, 2000, 65). Literature aimed to guide readers in alignment with the leadership's beliefs, leading to self-censorship in the industry (88). The effects of this control are still evident, as the government maintains substantial influence and censorship over traditional and online publishing industry (Hockx, 2015, 8-12).

Several studies have analyzed censorship by the CCP and identified characteristics of content that may prompt censorship (Link, 2000; Hockx, 2015; King, et. al., 2013; Roberts, 2018; Lu et. al., 2022). Currently, two theories are widely accepted in scholarship: state critique theory and collective action potential theory. These theories describe the government's objectives and motivations for applying censorship. I do not view them as mutually exclusive, as both could have explanatory value in explaining censorship of different types of expressions.

The state critique theory suggests that censorship is used by the government when expressions are critical of its policies or authority. This prevents the spread of ideas that may challenge the government's legitimacy and also helps to shape public opinion. The government practices censorship by restricting access to expressions critical of its performance, ensuring that only state-aligned information reaches the public. Additionally, the government may produce and

distribute a significant volume of information to divert attention from undesirable content (Roberts, 2018, 80).

The theory of collective action potential asserts that censorship is aimed at people who come together to express themselves collectively without government control and who have the potential to take collective action, regardless of the content of their expressions. Even apparently harmless expressions, such as online communities sharing jokes, may be censored if they create alternative discursive spaces (Miller and Galleger, 2021, 1011-1013).

These theories show how political and discursive power are closely intertwined in China. This thesis will contribute to existing theoretical literature by evaluating the extent to which the two theories can explain the role of the Home's literary publications in creating narratives about migrant workers that contrast with the CCP's narrative, and the Chinese authorities' reaction to these productions. One important point to consider is that while previous research on the Home has emphasized its lack of political demands and its collaboration with local authorities as factors that create and maintain its discursive space (Thelle, 2013, 378; Qiu and Wang, 2012, 140-142), these explanations may not be sufficient when we consider similar stories about the precarious lives of migrant workers that were published in media tend to be short lived or censored by the state (Zhou, 2017; Sun, 2018, 120; Li, 2022).

With this theoretical framework, this study aims to provide further explanations of the factors that enable the Home to establish its own discursive space. Specifically, my aim is to answer the following question: how does censorship work for publications by the Beijing based NGO: Migrant Workers Home?

To do this, I analyze the organization of the Home, their publications, and government and media publications on migrant workers. The data consist of four essays from the Group, and twenty government and media articles. I evaluate how closely the Group's discourse align with the government, as well as the Home's connections with the state. In order to do so, I apply case study methodology to explore the Home and the Group and employ qualitative content analysis and framing theory to analyze the data.

The thesis is structured as follows: section two offers a literature review, while sections three and four explain the theories and methodology used. The subsequent chapter presents the findings, and the conclusion makes additional remarks and discusses limitations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Migrant Workers in China

The emergence of migrant workers as a distinct social group can be traced back to the market-oriented economic reforms that started in the late 1970s. Before the reforms, the majority of the population lived in rural areas and worked in agriculture (Naughton, 2006, 9-10). Strict restrictions were in place, including food rationing and the household registration system known as *hukou,* which was implemented in the 1950s and classified households as either rural or urban, and was used to control internal migration (Li, 2008, 3).

However, with the acknowledgement by both the state and the market of the importance of rural migrant labor in promoting the market economy, privatization and urban development, policies were put in place to relax aspects of the hukou system and facilitate the movement of rural migrants into the city (Sun, 2020, 116-120). This shift began in the early 1980s when rural hukou holders started moving to cities due to a surplus population of labor in the countryside caused by increasing agricultural productivity and land distribution to households (Li, 2008, 3). This was coupled with the demand for cheap labor in newly established special economic zones, state industries, and infrastructure projects. Moreover, globalization and the country's accession to the World Trade Organization, accompanied by the state's neoliberal policies which led to a withdrawal in the areas of social reproduction and protection, further fueled the volume of internal labor migration (Chan et. al., 2010, 132-133).

Labor migration primarily consists of young people seeking employment, city life, and new experiences (Florence, 2007, 133). They are employed in manufacturing, construction, service industries, small businesses, and domestic work (ILO, 2011, 5-6). Migrant workers endure long hours, unfavorable working conditions, low and insecure wages, and limited job benefits (9). They often reside in crowded dormitories provided by their employers, located near their workplaces such as factories or construction sites (Sun, 2020, 117; Chang, 2009).

However, due to the *hukou* system, migrant workers are unable to obtain permanent urban residency. Instead, they must apply for temporary work and residence permits, typically valid for only one year and tied to employment (China Labour Bulletin, 2022). The lack of urban *hukou* deprives them of various urban services, including public education, health coverage, subsidized housing, and other state-provided benefits (Sun, 2020, 115-117). This system also poses challenges for migrant parents who wish to bring their children along when migrating for employment. Consequently, many parents are forced to leave their children in the care of relatives in their home villages. This has led to a significant population of left-behind children in rural China, lacking the physical presence, emotional support, and guidance of their parents, which greatly affects their overall well-being and development (117).

Migrant workers are also subject to discrimination by the media and urbanites. This discrimination partly lies in the *suzhi* (素质) discourse. *Suzhi* refers to the 'quality' or level of personal characteristics, abilities, and knowledge. The possession of *suzhi* is associated with the origin of an individual or a group (Sun, 2008, 41-45). Migrant workers are frequently labeled as *nongmingong* (农民工), meaning "peasant worker" and is generally used to describe someone with a rural household registration who has migrated to a city to *dagong (*打工*)*, meaning 'working for the boss' and referring to temporary jobs as well as their precarious conditions. According to Sun (2020, 122), popular media and cultural productions play a significant part in portraying *nongmingong* as lacking in *suzhi*, and thus requiring development, education, and civilization.

The status of these workers as a class is subject to discussion. Migrant workers in China are different from earlier and new state sector workers, who are urban residents with entitlement to social welfares, due to their precarious conditions (118). Some scholars consider them as part of China's urban underclass (Thornton, 2017, 261-263), while others see them as part of the new working class between the rural and urban social strata (Carrillo and Goodman, 2012, 8-9). Yet, Sun (2012, 996) argues these discussions reveal the expression and fragmentation of social classes, emphasizing the uncertainty of working-class awareness in modern China. Marginalized individuals assert themselves against the cultural hierarchy yet conform to gain recognition (1010). This contradictory dynamic both acknowledges and limits the formation of collective consciousness among migrant workers, risking its ultimate undermining (*ibid*).

Migrant workers in China are often categorized into two groups: first generation and second generation. The first generation migrated to cities in the 1980s to earn money before returning to their rural hometowns (Sun, 2020, 116). The second generation, born in the 1990s or later, enjoy better living conditions and education but still face challenges (116-117). Second-generation migrants, who grew up in urban areas, strongly identify with cities and struggle to adjust to rural life (120). As a result, they prefer to remain in urban areas despite uncertain job prospects and living conditions.

The National Bureau of Statistics of China estimates that currently there are more than 295 million migrant workers, making up roughly one-third of the country's workforce (2023). These workers are an important part of the Chinese economy. Yet, they are left to pursue a precarious life, often marginalized and facing discrimination with limited ability to create a collective consciousness and gain recognition.

2.2. Chinese Government and Media Narratives of Migrant Workers

The public perception and debate surrounding migrant workers has evolved over time through media coverage and government policies. Until early 1990s, these issues were considered unusual and causing social problems, hence, sparking intense public debate (Zhang, 2001, 24). Since the 1990's public perception has become more normalized and less sensationalized (Florence, 2006, 12-13). The perspectives of reporting by the government and media have presented a mixed narrative on migrant workers, portraying them as both a negative destabilizing force and contributing factor to economic reforms, the market economy, and development (*ibid*).

Migrant workers have been derogatorily labeled with homogenizing terms that evoke a sense of unease and disorder in urban environments. In the 1980s, they were commonly referred to as "floating population" (*mangliu*), even in policy statements, depicting them as undifferentiated laborers causing fear and anxiety (Zhang, 2001, 25-26). They were portrayed and treated as disposable labor (*ibid*). In the 1990s, the term "*nongmingong*" emerged, which appeared less controversial but still homogenized their experiences and labeled them as peasants. This term reinforces the *suzhi* discourse despite their primarily non-agricultural work (Sun, 2020, 117). Unfortunately, it continues to be widely used in various contexts (*ibid*).

Yet, within the context of market reforms, migrant workers have been portrayed as dynamic contributors to the country's economy. Policies advocating for their rights and the elimination of prejudice have been issued, indicating state's changing perspective (Gleiss, 2015, 5). The government has also encouraged controlled migration and reduced *hukou* restrictions to promote economic growth. Despite still seeing them as a potential challenge to social stability, Chinese media and the government have begun recognizing the contributions of migrant workers to development (*ibid*). Concurrently, migration has been reconceptualized as a way for migrant workers to integrate into the market economy and enhance their *suzhi* to solve their socio-economic problems. This reconceptualizing depoliticizes social life by shifting responsibility from the collective to the individual, removing the choices and actions of individuals from the context of power structures (14). This neo-liberal perspective is evident in state-sponsored migrant worker museums in Shenzhen and Guangzhou which highlight the workers' contributions to economic growth and the government's provision of care and welfare. These museums emphasize individualism and self-responsibility; hence, the view of migrant citizenship is development-oriented based on migrant workers' contributions to economic growth, their entrepreneurial aspirations (Qian and Florence, 2021, 3-4). They emphasize the government's efforts to maintain a satisfied workforce crucial for China's global economic involvement (van Crevel, 2019, 136-138).

Stories about migrant workers' problems and struggles also find media coverage. However, as the Chinese government believes that the media should help to prevent social conflict and maintain stability, the coverage of these issues often tends to be short-lived (Sun, 2018, 120). Recently the government has used different ways to frame migrant workers' problems in media coverage. This includes a 'social justice' frame, which gives voice to the workers' problems, a 'social harmony' frame, which emphasizes appeasing the workers to avoid social unrest, an 'education and guidance' frame, which scolds the workers for their actions and urges them to use 'proper channels,' and a 'law and order' frame, which quickly criminalizes the workers' actions and denies them access to public representation, including social media (*ibid*).

These topics and migrant workers' rights are also discussed in magazines for migrant workers. Yet discussion of these issues is restricted, due to the government's control. Resembling the mainstream media, these magazines portray migrant workers as hardworking, self-sacrificing,

and having an enterprising spirit in a tough but fair environment and are expected to succeed by improving their productivity (Florence, 2007, 146).

Overall, migrant workers' experiences are often overlooked, and government control limits the discussion of their problems and rights withing its narrative. In these official portrayals, migrant workers are often idealized as hardworking, resilient, and dedicated individuals who possess an entrepreneurial spirit and contribute to the economic growth of the country. They are often depicted as symbols of perseverance and sacrifice, leaving their rural hometowns to seek employment opportunities in urban areas. This narrative does not cover the complete picture of the migrant worker reality as discussed in the previous section.

2.3. Migrant Workers Home and CCP's relationship with NGOs

The Home is a grassroot migrant worker NGO. Ensuring the protection of migrant workers' rights, strengthening migrant workers' self-esteem and position in society by encouraging migrant workers to engage in cultural production, as well as giving them a platform to express their views and making their voices heard are central elements to its formation (Thelle, 2013, 358; van Crevel, 2019, 128-129). In 2002, a group of young migrant workers in Beijing established an art troupe to perform songs based on their experiences as migrant workers, and advocate cultural representation for migrant workers (Thelle, 2013, 360). They soon gained media attention and registered as an NGO to diversify their activities and reach out more directly to people in their community (*ibid*). The NGO was mostly run by migrant workers and volunteers, with assistance from academics and important intellectual figures of the New Left who played a significant role in establishing and securing financial support for the Home (van Crevel, 2019, 128). The term "New Left" refers to a collection of various left-wing political ideas that appeared in the 1990s. These ideas are critical of the economic reforms that were implemented under Deng Xiaoping, which placed importance on market liberalization and privatization (Li, 2015, 46-48).

Over the next decade, its activities expanded to encompass a wide variety of endeavors, including cultural events, education initiatives, publishing, philanthropy, vocational training, and organic agriculture (van Crevel, 2019, 128). The Home established a library, museum, night schools and weekend classes, an assistance center that provided legal counseling and training to migrant workers, as well as an experimental school for the children of migrant workers. The Home

created social enterprises such as second-hand clothing shops and computer repair workshops to generate income to support their programs (Thelle, 2013, 361). The majority of customers at these social enterprises are migrant workers themselves who purchase items like blue jeans and school bags for their families (Qiu and Wang, 2012, 133). The Home strives to expand its activities and establish a distinct discourse for migrant workers. However, as a labor NGO, it faces numerous restrictions, a common challenge for NGOs in China. Therefore, investigating the relationship between the CCP and NGOs becomes crucial. Since the Home's activities can be seen as political, it is essential to understand how they navigate this landscape.

Due to the sensitive nature of labor issues in China, labor NGOs face challenges in registering as NGOs and securing funding (Franceschini and Lin, 2019, 76). The Chinese government generally discourages organized public efforts, which could potentially lead to political dissent, creating a difficult operating environment for NGOs (Zhang and Skoric 2019, 3). Labor NGOs in China vary in size, activities, goals, and relations with the government. They provide services like legal counseling, cultural education, and awareness-raising about labor rights. Unlike independent trade unions, they do not handle workplace grievances between workers and management (Howell, 2021, 104). However, NGOs emphasis on this individualistic and legalistic approach to labor rights is heavily criticized by some scholars, as it aligns with the political agenda of the CCP (Lee and Shen, 2011, 208; Chan, 2013, 12-13).

Since 2012, the government has employed less overt means to suppress labor NGOs. These tactics involve implementing new laws that enhance bureaucratic oversight and restrict funding, resulting in significant consequences for both individuals and organizations (Franceschini and Nesossi's, 2018, 115). This approach appears to be more successful as labor activists have become resistant to more forceful methods of repression (116 -129). Howell (2015, 703) calls this strategy "welfarist incorporation," to maintain social control.

Additionally, Chinese labor NGO’s face difficulties in becoming a progressive political force as they lack "social capital," which means weak connections with workers and the government due to limited trust from the public and the government (Franceschini, 2014, 476). The Home is in a relatively advantageous position in this regard. Unlike third-party organizations that aim to assist marginalized groups, the Home was established by migrant workers, which

eliminates the issue of representation. The organization has cultivated positive relationships with both media and government authorities, which could alleviate official distrust. Thelle (2013, 360) notes that the Home's founders were eventually recognized by the Ministry of Justice and received awards and accolades for their work. Van Crevel (2019, 129) highlights that the Home's events are predominantly community-led initiatives with government support.

Research underscores the Home's ability to maintain positive relationships with the public, media, government, and community plays a crucial role in its strategy to navigate challenges (Thelle, 2013, 378; Lian and Oliver, 2018, 12-15). While the Home's activities imply a certain political stance, the Home's absence of specific political requests allows the organization to engage in these activities and build positive connections with the government (Thelle, 2013, 378). The organization's demands are general and not centered around material or political gain (*ibid*). Additionally, the Home adapts to new political environments. The recent case of the music band established by the Home's founders exemplifies their adaptability. Through collaboration with the local government on cultural initiatives for Rural Revitalization, the band changed its name to "Gucang" meaning "Barn," which aligns with the agrarian context and avoids contentious class associations (Zhong, 2023, 293). This showcases their capacity to embrace change.

The relationship between labor NGOs and the government has been complex, presenting various obstacles. Nonetheless, the Home has managed to cultivate positive relationships with the media, government, and community. These efforts in turn seems to be allowing the Home to sustain their activities which may express views differentiating from state narratives.

2.4. Picun Literature Group

A notable cultural initiative by the Home that could potentially challenge the CCP's migrant worker discourse is Picun literature group. The Group was formed in 2014 with the help of volunteering Beijing-based academics (van Crevel, 2019, 129). It offers a space for workers interested in literature to study and discuss. The Group, mainly consisting of migrant workers, publishes printed materials, such as multiple-author anthologies and individual collections (Picerni, 2020, 150). Moreover, it launched a bimonthly journal named New-Worker Literature in 2019. It receives visits and lectures from the members of various state affiliated institutions including Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP (Iovene, 2023, 265; van Crevel, 2023, 326).

Occasionally, the Group members are invited to events and activities organized by state cultural apparatus such as Lao She institute (*ibid*). These publications are *minjian,* meaning outside of the system. *Minjian* publications, to varying degrees, encompass three characteristics: financial independence from the state, lack of official approval by the state system, and a non-elite or grassroots social status (Veg, 2019, 22). When associated with cultural productions, *minjian* embody the terms independent', 'underground', 'unofficial' and 'informal' which are often attributed to the qualities that deviate from the mainstream, and highlights the product has not come through an officially recognized unit, such as a publisher (van Crevel, 2019). The Group members also put their work on online platforms, such as NetEase, where they can reach more people.

Due to the nature of migrant workers unstable work and life conditions, with people joining and leaving frequently, the Group's membership is highly unpredictable (van Crevel, 2019,129). Therefore, instead of making regular and cumulative programs, it focuses on identifying the needs of members and providing a supportive environment where they can share their writing and receive feedback (130).

Various similar themes occur in the Group's productions. These include the portrayal of factory work, homesickness, displacement, frustration, alienation, and a critique of the social and cultural norms of urban life (Picerni, 2020, 151). Numerous texts depict the sorrow and suffering experienced by migrant workers and inequalities they face when they leave their hometowns to work in the city. They often express a yearning for home and repeatedly mention family members such as parents, siblings, and their hometown (Thelle, 2013, 368). They often express migrant workers' motivations to leave rural areas in expectation of adventure and glamour associated with urban centers, and describe how their hopes and dreams are often shattered upon encountering urban culture and experiencing discrimination and contempt from city dwellers (*ibid*). Moreover, they often seem to express the perspectives and experiences of a larger group in their publications, using the inclusive "we" to describe shared meanings and experiences that reflect broader social issues (Ting, 2023, p. 334). Furthermore, the active participation of migrant workers in both the Home and the Group tends to foster their activist mindset, leading to a shift in their cultural productions from individual-focused narratives to ones that highlight collective meanings (ibid, p. 242; van Crevel, 2023, p. 320).

The expressions of migrant workers often diverge from the portrayals of the government and the media. Furthermore, Zhang (2023, 452) argues they play a crucial role in highlighting an often-marginalized labor force and turning their experiences into a relatable part of popular culture Thus, there is also a debate surrounding whether the cultural productions of the Home can be classified as activism (Thelle, 2013; Qiu and Wang, 2012; Picerni, 2020).

On the one hand, some of the Home's cultural productions criticize managers and authorities for their corruption, malpractice and mistreatment of migrant workers, and brings attention to issues such as left-over children (Fei 2018, 423). Sun (2012, 86) calls this 'cultural activism,' where marginalized social groups use various media to speak out against those in power. On the other hand, the impact of this criticism on society as a whole might be limited and its unlikely that it could lead to concrete actions from the government and society (Fei, 2018, 426). Moreover, while migrant workers express their sufferings and mistreatments, scholars observes that they do not demand social change (Thelle, 2013, 378; Picerni, 2020, 164-164). Instead, they use the existing state channels to secure survival and build from there (Qiu and Wang, 2012, 140-143). Moreover, when using state channels, they sometimes show alignment with official discourse, such as when invited to take part in events organized by state media (van Crevel, 2023, 315).

In sum, the Home aims to support migrant workers with various initiatives and activities. Their literary publications use art to enable migrant workers to tell their own experiences and stories. Migrant workers' expressions in these publications are often different than the official idealized versions of the migrant worker narrative, which would be subject to censorship and short lived if published on mainstream media or on online platforms. Yet, it appears that the Group manages to keep their work online for the public eye without much censorship.

2.5. Literary and Online Censorship in China:

In China, censorship often targets narratives deemed politically sensitive or subversive. The Group creates essays which offers alternative narratives and occasionally publishes them online. Therefore, it is crucial to examine censorship in literary and online realms.

Literature in China has always been viewed as a crucial aspect of life, and has been highly valued by writers, readers, critics, and political authorities, despite their differing opinions on

various issues (Link, 2000, 5). These groups share the belief that literature plays an important role in promoting morality, social life, and politics, from the daily lives of ordinary readers to the policymaking of the highest leaders (*ibid*). For instance, Mao Zedong's "Yan'an Talks" expressed that literature could serve both as a way to expose social problems through satire and as a way to promote ideology (Denton, 2016, 226). Consequently, literature in China is important in shaping political discourse and addressing social and political issues. It is used to express the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups and to critique issues like corruption, censorship, and environmental degradation. Literature is also used as a tool to better understand and engage with these issues by politicians, academics, and social groups (Link, 2000, 5-9; Hockx, 2021).

In addition, literature serves entertainment purposes in China, with a thriving publishing industry and internet literature providers producing various forms of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry (Hockx, 2015, 17). The Chinese publishing industry had a total size of approximately 200 billion yuan in 2020, with book retail sales accounting for 45% (Ren and Kang, 2021, 495). Moreover, in 2012, the use of applications that provide access to online literature was observed in roughly 40% of Chinese internet users, a figure comparable to the percentage of people who used the internet for shopping (Hockx, 2015, 4). This trend continued to grow, in 2020 number of people in China who use internet literature accounted for 46.5% of all Internet users in China (Xiao et. al. 2021, 2).

Due to its influential role in society, literature is often subject to censorship and state control, whether it is published online or in traditional formats. Idema and Haft (1997, 300-301) examine the Chinese literature scene from as early as Qing Dynasty to late 20th century, and concludes political and ideological aspects are the main criteria for evaluation of literary work, which are modern adaptations of Confucian moral teachings. Moreover, after the socialist literary system was created in 1949, the state took control of both the technology and the social organization of literary production (Hockx, 2015, 25).

According to Link (2000, 59), during the high-socialist era, literary censorship was implemented to restrict several aspects such as disloyalty towards the leadership or its ideology, highlighting societal issues like corruption and poverty, the influence of foreign cultures, and ambiguous writing styles such as poetry with unclear meanings or stream-of-consciousness fiction

(Link, 2000, 59). He further explains that the literary control system in China was designed with the intention of maintaining a strong connection between the top leadership and readers (65). Through commands and prohibitions, the goal of literature was to guide readers toward thinking in line with what the leadership believed was best. This has also led to self-censorship among writers and the publishers (88). The effects of this system are still evident, as the government exerts significant control and censorship over the publishing industry, including online publishing platforms (Hockx, 2015, 8-12).

Censorship in these domains operate in different ways. For the conventional publishing industry, pre-publication editorial censorship is in place to ensure that no politically sensitive or controversial content is published (Link, 2000, 92). The government has a list of prohibited topics, which includes issues related to democracy, human rights, and political dissent. Authors who write about these topics risk having their work censored or even facing punishment. Censorship is more subtle and all-encompassing. It mainly relies on psychological pressure and self-censorship instilled by the fear of punishment (*ibid*). Psychological pressure party emerges from the separation between the way censorship policy was presented to the public and the actual positions of leaders. Publicly, policies were portrayed in a favorable light to make the leadership look good, while internal reports provided more honest instructions to editors and publishers (93). Officials might announce that certain writers can continue writing freely, yet the publishers may still choose not to publish any of their work, leaving writers and editors to assess the political-literary climate on their own (*ibid*).

For online platforms, the state has established a comprehensive system of surveillance, censorship, and punishment mechanisms. This involves monitoring individuals' online activity, issuing directives to online news portals and social media companies to filter content, and detaining those who express dissenting opinions online (Roberts, 2018, 105-106). Recently, the government reorganized its internet censorship efforts, with two organizations taking on the majority of surveillance and content moderation responsibilities: the Cyberspace Affairs Commissions (CACs) and the Network Security Bureaus (NSBs) within Public Security Bureaus (PSBs). The CACs monitor and manage online public opinion, coordinate with state-owned media, and employ internet trolls to guide public opinion (*ibid*), while the NSBs police the internet and can issue

warnings and punishments to netizens (Fedasiuk, 2021). Additionally, internet service providers and social media websites also contribute to censorship (*ibid*).

Literature holds considerable influence over political discourse and societal issues, which prompts government control and censorship in both traditional and online formats. The Home and the Group present a distinct scenario in this context which requires investigation. My objective is to analyze the literary publications of the Group and the functioning of censorship in this case.

3. Theoretical Framework

To engage with the data, I apply the framing theory. Moreover, to explain how censorship works in the case of the Group's publications, I examine the state critique and collective action potential theories of censorship.

Framing theory reveals that the way in which information is presented can shape how it is perceived and acted upon. The way a message is "framed" - which includes what's emphasized, the language used, and the presentation - can profoundly impact how people interpret and respond to it (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, 94; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2019, 16). Different framings of the same information can lead to vastly different outcomes (Entman,1993, 52). Moreover, the impact of framing can be observed both at the personal and societal level. At an individual level, exposure to different frames can lead to changes in one's attitudes towards a particular issue. At a societal level, frames may play a role in shaping broader processes such as political socialization, decision-making, and collective actions (de Vreese, 2005, 51).

Framing theory is suitable for analyzing the data due to its recognition of frames as flexible and subject to change through "reframing" (Chong and Druckman 2007, 108). This is particularly relevant for analyzing migrant workers' portrayal in media. Previously labeled as a "floating population" associated with urban disruption, the discourse has shifted to portray them as "peasant workers", thus highlighting their economic contributions. This change reflects a political process driven by the government's desire to align the discourse with the CCP's economic and social policies (Li, 2008, 3). Framing theory also demonstrate how minor changes in issue presentation can significantly influence public views (Chong and Druckman 2007, 109-110). Additionally, it acknowledges the coexistence, competition or complementarity of different frames (Wise and

Brewer, 2010, 438; Chong and Druckman 2007, 112). As a result, a single issue can be viewed from multiple perspectives, and different values or considerations can be attached to it (113-114). The Home aims to create their own discourse providing distinct perspectives which may still be seen as a sensitive issue by the government. Thus, applying framing theory is suitable for analysis in the context of censorship.

Multiple studies (Link, 2000; Hockx, 2015; King et al., 2013; Roberts, 2018; Lu et al., 2022) have provided explanations for Chinese government's censorship and identified specific content features that may trigger censorship. State critique theory and collective action potential theory are commonly accepted in describing the government's motives and objectives for implementing censorship. It should be noted that although these theories may account for various types of censorship, I do not view them as entirely separate from each other.

State critique theory emphasizes censorship is used when the content of the expressions is critical of the government or its policies (MacKinnon, 2012, 103). By censoring these expressions, the government can prevent the spread of ideas that might challenge its authority or legitimacy (Tai, 2014, 187; Ruan et.al., 2021, 133). State authorities engage in this type of censorship by removing, erasing, or restricting access to websites, blogs or publications that express political opinions that are considered unsuitable or inappropriate (Marolt, 2011, 54).

In certain cases, censorship may not entail complete removal of specific expressions from the public domain. Instead, it can be achieved by making them harder to access or by increasing the visibility of alternative expressions (Roberts, 2018,109-112). This approach is frequently used to shape public opinion. Roberts (2018) describes this type of censorship as flooding (80). It refers to producing and disseminating a vast amount of information, typically by an authority, to divert attention from information that the authority wishes to suppress (*ibid*). Furthermore, this theory suggests that the government might also restrict certain expressions, such as complaints about poor government performance, from public reach (Marolt, 2011, 54).

Collective action potential theory underlines that the target of censorship is people who express themselves collectively outside of government control and with the potential of mobilization (King, et. al., 2013; Pan, 2020; Gallagher and Miller, 2021). According to this theory, the content of the expression is not important. An expression critical to government or its policies

might not be censored unless it poses a threat by instigating collective action. Seemingly harmless collective expressions, such as online communities sharing jokes, may be censored if they create alternative discursive spaces (Miller and Galleger, 2021). Moreover, collective expressions, such as discussions on the same event or on collective action (e.g., protests) on social media, are likely to be censored. Pan (2020, 67) shows that questions or comments that mention collective action on local governments' web portals are censored more often than the ones that do not mention collective action. The theory underlines that the CCP allows a range of positive and negative expressions about the state that might make some government officials and policies to appear unfavorable. CCP seems to realize that being cast in a bad light does not jeopardize its grip on power as long as it can suppress discussions associated with events that could lead to collective action. King et. al. (2015, 14) takes this notion further and claim: "the Chinese people are individually free but collectively in chains."

These theories highlight the interplay between political and discursive power in China, explaining the government's censorship to maintain authority. The Group's narratives potentially challenge this authority through alternative frames. To analyze censorship in the Group's publications, I employ these theories along with other scholarly explanations.

4. Methodology

The analysis combines qualitative content analysis and the case study method. I apply the former to the selected essays from the Group, and articles since the latter method necessitates establishing a data framework (Crowe et al., 2011, 6).

4.1. Data

The data consist of four essays from the Group, and twenty government and media articles. Out of these, four articles are obtained from the journal *Qiushi*, which is an official publication of the Central Committee of the CCP, and the rest are from China.org. I have chosen to scan these platforms as they reflect or serve the governments' official discourse. Most of the articles on these platforms are obtained from leading Chinese media sources like China Daily and Xinhua News, in addition to featuring their own content.

To enhance the selection process, I employed specific search terms to find relevant articles and news stories focusing on the experiences of migrant workers that could be compared to the essays written by the Group. The chosen search terms were "migrant worker(s)," "rural worker(s)," "workers," "working class," and "poverty alleviation." Additionally, the literature review highlighted the fact that migrant workers are referred to by various names throughout history and depending on the perspective (whether they are perceived as a destabilizing factor or contributing to growth and rural development). Consequently, I included the search term "working class" and "workers" to locate government-released articles that discuss workers in a general sense, with the possibility of also mentioning migrant workers. Including the term "poverty alleviation" was important because news stories on rural development often focus on the lives of migrant workers and may include poverty alleviation in their titles or as keywords.

I intentionally avoided using terms such as "social harmony," "inequality," and "justice" since they tend to generate overly broad news articles encompassing diverse topics such as news from different government bodies, developments in minority regions, the government's international visits and cooperation with developing countries, or general economic development. By focusing on the specific terms mentioned earlier, I aimed to narrow down the search results to articles and news stories directly related to the experiences of migrant workers and rural workers.

I examined the platforms from late 2014 to 2023, which aligns with the establishment and activities of the Group. Initially, the search on China.org yielded over 3000 articles, but many of them were duplicates. I then narrowed down the number to sixteen articles that specifically focused on individual or a small number of migrant workers' stories, allowing for comparison with the Group's essays. Consequently, articles covering topics such as economic development, job market indicators, migrant worker issues in other countries, photo or video documentaries, and short news were excluded. The search on Qiushi initially generated approximately 1000 results, with many articles appearing multiple times. By applying the same criteria, the number was further reduced to 2 articles centered around migrant worker stories and 2 articles featuring talks and writings by Xi Jinping.

Table 1: Government and media publications regarding migrant workers.

Articles	Title	Publisher	Year	Classification
1	Fighting for migrant workers	China Daily	2015	Migrant worker news story
2	From 'left-behind' children to street children	China.org	2015	Migrant worker news story
3	Migrant children face struggle for city education	CNTV	2015	Migrant worker news story
4	Joys and sorrows of elderly migrant workers	China.org	2017	Migrant worker news story
5	Overnight fame troubles nanny essayist	China.org	2017	Migrant worker news story
6	Feature: Chinese pole dancer rises from scaffolds to world stage	Xinhua News	2018	Migrant worker news story
7	Across China: Migrant workers cook their hometown comfort foods in communal kitchen	Xinhua News	2018	Migrant worker news story
8	Profile: street cleaner lives novel life	Xinhua News	2019	Migrant worker news story
9	China Focus: The delivery men sitting tall in the saddle	Xinhua News	2019	Migrant worker news story
10	Young voice speaks out for migrant workers	China Daily	2019	Migrant worker news story
11	Life in factory: children's summer vacation with working parents	Xinhua News	2019	Migrant worker news story
12	Profile: Chinese farmer livestreams passion for ballads	Xinhua News	2020	Migrant worker news story
13	From the Governance of China I, Hard Work Makes Dreams Come True	Qiushi	2020	Chapter from Xi Jinping's book
14	Xi calls on working class to make new, historic endeavors for China's modernization	Xinhua News	2020	Speech by Xi Jinping
15	Labor export boosts poverty alleviation in Chinese county	Xinhua News	2020	Migrant worker news story

16	Poverty alleviation workshop helps rural women realize dreams	Xinhua News	2021	Migrant worker news story
17	Profile: The migrant worker with an audience of millions	Xinhua News	2022	Migrant worker news story
18	Across China: Migrant women's life sweetened by wine industry in northwest China	Xinhua News	2022	Migrant worker news story
19	Profile: Former migrant worker now a lawmaker helping rural laborers	Xinhua News	2023	Migrant worker news story
20	Profile: A rural migrant worker's poetic journey	Xinhua News	2023	Migrant worker news story

The essays by the Group selected are: *My Impression of Picun* by Fu Qiuyun, Fan Yusu's *I am Fan Yusu*, *The Workshop Mouse* by Guo Fulai, and *Silent Majority and Those Who Want to Talk* by Chen Diqiao. These essays are relatively well-known, also published in web portals, and centers migrant workers' lives and struggles.

The essays were originally written in Chinese, but the analysis is conducted on their translated versions. The decision to analyze the translated formats was primarily based on two reasons. Firstly, the fact that these articles were translated already serves as a criterion for their selection, indicating a certain level of popularity. In other words, they are well-known within the context. Secondly, the translations were carried out by professionals, which helps mitigate the issue of translation to some extent. According to Bassnett (2011), translation studies emphasize the close relationship between language and culture. This implies that words and sentences can have different meanings depending on the cultural context in which they are used. This aspect is particularly significant when translating from Chinese to English, as cultural disparities often lead to divergent linguistic choices in conveying meaning. Consequently, achieving absolute accuracy in translation is considered nearly impossible (32). However, while certain linguistic elements may be lost in translation, it is still feasible to translate the underlying meaning into the target language (40).

The selection of news articles from the English version of the platforms was based on similar reasons. Firstly, the research objective focused on examining the government discourse on

migrant workers, and the translated materials available on state media platforms represent the views and interests of the CCP that it wants to emphasize. These translations serve as a means for the CCP to communicate its perspectives and provide a selective representation of its narrative to the audience. Moreover, it is important to note that English versions of these platforms cater to a significant number of visitors within China itself. Alvaro (2015, 269-270) demonstrates globally these platforms have similar rankings to that of New York Times and Al Jazeera in terms of number of visits, and over 90% of English version of these platform's visitors originate from within China. Therefore, it is assumed that they do not diverge significantly from the domestic Chinese language media pieces.

4.2. Analysis:

Qualitative content analysis involves subjectively interpreting the meaning and significance of text-based data, with a focus on context and meaning, by coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, 1277-1288; Bengtesson, 2016, 8; Lindgren et.al., 2020, 2). The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the content and context of the data being analyzed. This method can be conducted using both deductive and inductive approaches. In a deductive approach, the researcher begins with a pre-existing theoretical framework or set of categories, and uses them to guide the analysis. In an inductive approach, the researcher allows themes and categories to emerge from the data itself (Bengtesson, 2016, 9-10). As the design is data driven, I adopt the inductive approach.

The analytical process involves examining the data, identifying significant quotes, keywords, metaphors, and contrasts. This leads to the identification of labels and codes, which are analyzed for similarities and differences and then grouped into themes. These themes serve as a cohesive thread that connects recurring topics or experiences and provides meaning to the data (Lindgren et.al., 2020, 2), akin to the concept of a frame in framing theory.

Critics argue that the inductive approach of qualitative content analysis carry the risk of becoming a prisoner of induction (Graneheim et.al., 2017, 30), this problem can be addressed by revising the data and findings. Additionally, the method's limitations in data collection and analysis may hinder the development of new theories by making it difficult to understand the relationships

between different ideas. (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1281). Since this study is not aimed at developing new theories, qualitative content analysis is a suitable approach.

The case studies are useful for testing or complicating existing assumptions and theories (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014; Ridder, 2016). Existing theories serve as the starting point for case study research, and that propositions or frameworks can provide guidance and direction for identifying relevant evidence and reflecting the theoretical perspective (Yin, 2014, 14). The primary goal is to examine whether existing theoretical concepts, frameworks or models can be applied to a particular case or context.

I use case study to evaluate the censorship theories in the case of the Group's essays. Being a learning process, case studies can provide a wealth of information beyond merely testing hypotheses, and can be a valuable tool for understanding complex phenomena (Eysenck, 1976, 9). My objective is to identify the most effective theories and adaptations that explain censorship in the Group's case, focusing on comprehensive and insightful explanations rather than proving or disproving specific hypotheses.

Case studies are conducted through defining and selecting the case(s), collecting data, and analyzing and interpreting the results (Crowe et. al., 2011, 5-7). In the first stage the research question and the hypothesis are formulated with the help of a literature review (Ridder, 2016, 7). To reiterate, using the methods and theoretical framework outlined above, my aim is to answer the following substantive question: how does censorship work for publications by the Beijing based NGO: Migrant Workers Home? My hypothesis is that while certain aspects of the state critique might be applicable to the Group's publications, collective action potential theory has the most explanatory value in explaining the CCP's attitude towards the Home and the Group's publications. While the government might allow expressions that are critical to the state, which would be censored in state media, it may not consider the Home and the Group's publication as having the potential to cause a collective action risk that threatens its's authority over the migrant worker discourse. I expect that the Home's cooperative relationship with the CCP adds to this.

The case study approach also has limitations. The method faced criticism for its lack of scientific rigor and difficulty in generalizing findings to other settings and it has been argued it may be biased towards verification (Flyvbjerg, 2006, 221; Crowe et. al., 2011, 9). However, the

aim of this thesis is not to generalize the case and develop a theory, rather explore explanations for the case at hand. Moreover, these concerns can be addressed by seeking alternative explanations and being explicit about interpretation and conclusions also enhances the trustworthiness of case study analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2006, 221). This method enables direct testing of views on real-life situations and requires researchers to revise their hypotheses on essential points. Therefore, it is characterized by falsification rather than verification due to its in-depth nature (*ibid*). As I conduct a comprehensive analysis the data, and aim to provide explanations for the case, the issue of verification bias is minimal.

The next section represents the final phase of the case study, encompassing the analysis and outcomes. The outcomes can validate, strengthen, or undermine previous explanations of a case, and sometimes enable generalization beyond the specific cases examined without relying on statistical analysis (George and Bennet, 2005, 146). Nevertheless, it is crucial to avoid imposing a specific theoretical framework on the cases and refrain from using theoretical perspectives as rigid constraints (*ibid)*.

5. Findings

5.1. Analysis of the government and media articles

There are a few overarching topics in the articles. Although the articles acknowledge the challenges and unfavorable circumstances faced by migrant workers, they highlight improvements in wage security, income, and working and living conditions for these workers. Particularly, they emphasize the positive impact of rising incomes on improving the livelihoods of migrant workers, highlighting that their hard work is paying off. The discussion of government policies and recent advancements is often presented towards the end of the articles, conveying an optimistic tone. These observations are in line with the studies discussed in the literature review. The Chinese government believes that the media should help prevent social conflict and maintain stability (Sun, 2018, 120). Most of the articles frame migrant worker issues with ‘social justice’ and ‘social harmony’ which gives voice to the workers' problems but at the same time emphasizes appeasing the workers to avoid social unrest (*ibid*).

Moreover, the articles employ a range of statistics, including the number and percentage of migrant workers, the increase in their average income, and the annual migration of workers

from rural to urban areas. These statistics are often presented alongside individual migrant worker anecdotes. The articles generally adopt two overarching frames: the "human interest" frame, which personalizes the issue and evokes emotions, and the "economy consequences" frame, which examines the broader economic implications of the issue using statistics. Both frames are utilized simultaneously. The articles switch between emphasizing the personal stories of individual migrant workers with a "human interest" frame, and the broader economic implications of migrant labor with an ongoing focus on the "economy consequences" frame throughout the articles. This is especially evident in articles 7, 9, 15 and 19. For instance, in discussing the challenging work environment and extended working hours of migrant workers in the delivery services sector, article 9 emphasizes the following points:

> *"... forecasts that China's online-catering market had an estimated 355 million customers, generating an output value of 240 billion yuan (35.8 billion U. S. dollars) in 2018. Food delivery platforms ... created millions of job opportunities for young rural migrant workers. Reports on couriers ... show that 77 percent of their 5.7 million registered riders come from rural areas ... Many young rural workers who choose to deliver food as their first job, settle in cities with a decent salary to support their families. According to a recent Meituan-Dianping report, half of its 2.7 million riders provide the principal source of their household income."*

Additionally, several articles (5, 6, 8, 12, 17, 20) focus on the life story of a specific migrant worker and maintain an optimistic and positive tone. These articles portray migrant workers as dedicated, hardworking individuals with resilience and an optimistic outlook. While acknowledging the challenges they face, these articles do not delve into the specific hardships but instead highlight how migrant workers find solace and fulfillment through intellectual and cultural hobbies like writing, poetry, video-making, or dancing. These creative pursuits often bring recognition and acclaim. For instance, in article 12, migrant worker Ma Ruifeng, gains support and exposure by live-streaming his performance of *hua'er*, a traditional folk song, on an online platform. The article showcases how his passion for music contributes to personal growth, well-being and recognition:

“"Daring not go down street without money in pocket ... But as long as we are safe and sound, we will pull through together in the end," goes one of his songs. Ma wrote the song on the eve of the last lunar New Year ... The delight of his forthcoming family reunion was diluted by the poor year he had and little money he earned. "I wrote it for migrant workers just like me. Life can be difficult, but the support and understanding from family can keep us going. As long as you work hard, things will get better," he said ... Ma was invited to teach hua'er in a local middle school several times ... He even appeared on national television to perform in front of a live audience.”

Furthermore, article 5 delves into the story of Fan Yusu from the Home, highlighting how her essay *I am Fan Yusu* brought her fame. The article emphasizes that Fan has faced challenges such as depression and social phobia due to the sudden spotlight. The specific content of her essay is not mentioned. Fan's writing is commended for its authenticity in portraying the realities of life.

Articles 15 and 16 prioritize the ‘economy consequences’ and ‘social harmony’ frames. They frequently discuss initiatives aimed at improving the competitiveness of migrant workers through skill training, the role of migrant workers in rural development and poverty alleviation, and plans for recruiting rural citizens for urban employment. They acknowledge the positive contributions of migrant workers to economic development and highlight the improvements in their conditions. Furthermore, these articles emphasize the positive aspects of being a migrant worker, such as increased expenditure capability (they can spend their income on ‘luxury’ products such as Led TVs) and hopes for a better future for their children. These are in line with Florence (2007)’s findings. The mainstream media presents migrant workers as diligent and determined individuals who possess an entrepreneurial spirit and are willing to work hard in challenging but equitable circumstances (146).

Article 17 tells the story of He Chuan, a construction worker turned video blogger. He shares videos of his work on construction sites and meals consumed during his lunch breaks. His followers mostly comprise other migrant workers and students. The article depicts He Chuan as a satisfied and joyful migrant worker, highlighting his constructive attitude on his video platform:

"I work hard to earn money to support my family, and contribute to the construction of our country."

It also mentions the use of live-streaming platforms by migrant workers to discuss topics relevant to them, such as compensation, safety measures, and retirement. These digital tools provide them with a platform to voice their concerns and increase their visibility to a wider audience as Sun (2012) argued. Yet, she acknowledges the challenges of fully representing conflicts, injustices, and discrimination faced by migrant workers due to the absence of the dominant class on camera (97). The article, however, takes a more positive perspective and does not delve into these aspects or consider the potential possibilities and challenges that lie ahead for migrant workers in terms of self-representation and empowerment.

Articles 1 and 10 also address the representation issue. They focus on migrant workers' presence in the National People's Congress (NPC). These articles showcase the achievements of individual migrant workers who have made notable contributions in their respective fields and demonstrate a strong commitment to self-improvement. Article 1 focuses on Zhu, an NPC deputy who actively advocates for migrant workers' rights and has established a legal assistance office to resolve payment disputes. Zhu's personal experiences and unwavering dedication have motivated her to become a voice for migrant workers, bringing about positive change in their lives. The article quotes her:

> *"I credit my success to self-discipline and hard work … I know that the conditions in which migrant workers live are often harsh, but you have to look at the positive side and keep working hard and learning."*

Article 13 and Article 14 consist of an extract from *The Governance of China* by Xi Jinping and a speech given by him respectively. In both, he emphasizes the importance of the working class in building socialism with Chinese characteristics and improving its structure since the reform and opening. He suggests that workers should pursue their goals while contributing to the prosperity of China, and that dedication, honoring work and fostering high-caliber workers should become social norms. To achieve this, he recommends that trade unions and the government should provide dedicated services to workers, promote career development and vocational training, and safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. He says trade unions should make workers feel like the union is their ‘home,’ and stresses that stabilizing jobs, increasing income, and creating a

multi-tiered social security system are crucial to ensuring workers' greater fulfillment, happiness, and security.

It can be seen from these articles that workers are displayed as the crucial element in building China and their needs are acknowledged, but the problems are not highlighted. Moreover, the way Xi Jinping describes how trade unions should help workers appears to be partially in line with the Home' aims to advance human rights, with labor being a fundamental concept that represents traditional communist values like solidarity, mutual aid, and frugality (Thelle, 3013, 362).

The remaining articles address the problems of left-behind children and elderly migrant workers. These articles adopt the 'human interest' and 'social justice' frames. Articles 4 and 11 begin with an informative and neutral tone but conclude on an optimistic note. They provide examples of left-behind children who have successfully gained admission to universities and elderly migrant workers who continue to find fulfillment in their work in urban areas. The overall tone of Articles 2 and 3 is somewhat negative, emphasizing the gravity of social issues surrounding left-behind children. The articles conclude by highlighting the financial support provided by the government and the active efforts of various institutions to address these issues. They also note that additional support is needed to effectively resolve these problems.

Overall, the articles align with the government's discourse on migrant workers, as discussed in the literature review. They demonstrate a simultaneous utilization of "social justice" and "individual interest," "social harmony" and "economic consequences" frameworks in addressing migrant worker issues. It appears that the precondition to discuss problems is to mention the government efforts to solve these problems. While the majority maintain a positive tone, the articles refrain from explicitly critiquing the state or its policies.

5.2. Analysis of the Group's essays

Selected essays from the Group are focused on different experiences of their writers. They have few overarching themes such as inequality, the gap between the rich and the poor, injustice, isolation, little joy from life, precarious working living conditions, monotonous and mundane nature of their work/life and powerlessness. These are also in line with Picerni's (2020, 158-59) findings. Moreover, just like in the media and government articles these essays use "human interest"

frames, approaching the issues from an emotional perspective and personalizing them. Most of the stories start very personal, emphasizing the "I," perspective. Yet, the narratives about migrant workers should be understood as stories that represent the shared experiences of this socially marginalized group (Sun, 2014: 183; Pozzana 2019: 193). In addition, while focusing on I, most of the essays provide a "we" perspective in between lines. According to van Crevel (2023, 326), "we" in the Group's productions symbolizes social identification and restoration of dignity for precarious workers and advocacy for social justice. Therefore, these narratives can be seen as reflections of the collective struggles and challenges faced by all migrant workers.

The essays do not adopt "social justice," "social harmony," or "economic consequences" frames when addressing migrant workers' problems. Instead, they focus on a frame that can be classified as "social injustice," emphasizing themes of inequality, powerlessness, and precariousness without downplaying their situation or acknowledging improvements. They often pose open-ended questions that raise concerns about societal injustices and make references to the government's mishandlings. These aspects stand in stark contrast to the government and media articles.

In *Workshop Mouse*, Guo Fulai is writing about his most vivid memory since he came to Picun to work. The essay is about how a mouse found in their work dormitory brought joy to their otherwise unexciting and tedious lives. Guo describes his working conditions with other colleagues. They make counters and metal racks in a cramped workroom with more than ten people. He hints to their limited visibility:

> *"Outside stood two rows of tall, broad poplars. Each time a breeze blew, every single leaf seemed to wave at passers-by, but everyone just hurried by, too busy to look. They didn't pay any attention to us in our workroom either."*

The factory provides them free dormitory which, Guo writes, despite its flaws is better than paying for an apartment and is cozy enough. These flaws include a cracked door, pockmarked walls, and mouseholes in the ground. The workers spent their rest time at their dormitory, but the atmosphere is usually uneventful and lacking in activity. Since they all come from different places and have not known each other for long, they have little to talk about. With no television or computer in the dormitory, and feeling too shy to explore the town, they spend their time sitting

idly, without much to do. The essay takes a turn when the author and colleagues notice a mouse in their workspace. They decide to catch and train the mouse as a pet in a wire cage. Soon it becomes a source of fascination. They eagerly check on it after work. However, upon returning from a work trip in Suzhou, they discover that the mouse has passed away, with the cause of its death remaining unknown. Guo finishes his essay:

> *"Everyone was sad. Finally, Bianchen … buried the little mouse who'd kept us company for so long and brought a little joy into our arid working lives. The sultry heat of summer soon shrouded our workroom, and everyone felt too lethargic to talk. None of us brought up the mouse again."*

Although Guo's essay revolves around the one incident, it still underscores isolation, little joy from life, as well as the precarious working and living conditions of migrant workers and highlights "we" from a personal story. These themes are absent in the government and media articles, as they briefly mention the hardship, but mainly focus on the improved conditions and living standards of the migrant workers.

Fu Qiuyun's *My Impression of Picun* engages with the same themes as well as injustice, inequality, the gap between the rich and the poor. She starts her essay with:

> *"I want to escape from Picun…"*

She compares the poor living conditions in Picun to her initial imagination of Beijing as a splendid metropolis with high-rise buildings and bright lights. Then she explains why there are so many migrant workers living in Picun and essay takes a turn from "I" to "we:"

> *"Precisely because there are so many migrant workers in this small village, our living conditions have increasingly degraded. But why do people choose to squeeze into this village? Because we cannot afford renting an apartment in the downtown area, because the luxury department stores and fancy restaurants in the downtown area have driven us out."*

Then she asks:

> *"Whose fault is it? Is it the government policy or urban people's discrimination against us? Without the migrant workers' hard labor, what would Beijing be like today?"*

The authors in these essays display their precarious situations and Fu goes as far as questioning the government and society. This sharply contrasts with the articles analyzed above.

Fan Yusu's autobiographical essay explores similar topics but delves deeper into the issue of gender inequality in society, which plays a central role in many of the problems she encounters. Upon her return home from a trip, at the age of 12, she becomes acutely aware of the gender-based discrimination. Her family and community reject and shame her based on societal norms and expectations imposed on girls. This experience leaves her feeling embarrassed, ashamed, and uncertain about what lies ahead in her future.

> *"In our Xiangyang village, if baby sons (boys) would leave for several days …, it would be a trivial matter. But if a baby girl (daughter) would only leave the home, she would be like the eloped criminal from classic novels."*

Later, she recounts her experience of becoming a victim of domestic violence, leading her to return to her hometown with her children. However, she is not welcomed for long due to patriarchal traditions. She moves to Beijing and becomes a live-in nanny for the children of a wealthy businessman and his mistress. The employer provides lavish resources and attention to his son, including martial arts training, a live-in private tutor from a top university, and computer programming lessons. These make Fan to reflect on the well-being of her own children back in Picun, evoking strong emotions and tears in the solitude of the night. She also contemplates the lifestyle of her employers, finds herself thinking:

> *"Every time I would absent-mindedly ask myself if I was living in the Tang dynasty, in the Qing dynasty, or if this was the new socialist China."*

In the final sections, Fan discusses the psychological difficulties she experiences caused by her precarious life:

> *"Throughout the many years of my working life, I found that I could no longer trust people. All my contacts were quite superficial, and sometimes I was even afraid to greet people."*

She also mentions her mother's experience with land confiscation for the construction of a high-speed train station and the unfair compensation offered to affected families. Her mother becomes involved in a legal rights team to fight for their rights but the team encounters resistance from guards.

> *"Wherever they went, they were pushed back by the youngsters working as guards to maintain social stability. The captain of the legal rights team was sixty years old, the youngest member of the team, and he broke four ribs. The guards ... dislocated her (mother's) shoulder. The acre of land was bought up for 22.000 [±3185$] altogether. Per capita it is already very little, but how can the few people who cannot work continue to live? There are no authorities who want to think about it, there are no people willing to think about their soul. In every corner of the Divine Land, it is this way, and everyone has accepted the misfortunes as decreed by fate."*

Like Fu's essay, Fan's writing raises unresolved questions about society and how things are handled.

The final essay is *Silent Majority and Those Who Want to Talk* by Chen Diqiao. It is a reflection on *The Silent Majority* by Wang Xiaobo and revolves around the connection between language, power, and the marginalized communities in society. Chen highlights how disadvantaged communities often remain unheard and invisible due to various factors such as their inability or lack of opportunity to speak. Chen discusses the inherent divisions and inequalities in society, emphasizing the concentration of wealth among the elite and the apathy towards the working classes:

> *"Before I turned eighteen, I knew absolutely nothing about the structure of society. Maybe that's because I lived in a rural village, and had never seen any rich people, which means I had no personal experience of the gap between rich and poor. I didn't understand about the accumulation of wealth and the mechanisms of distribution. It wasn't like today, when anyone can just open their eyes to see the enormous wealth gap and injustice."*

It also reflects on the impact of Fan Yusu's viral essay and the attention it brought to the the Group, shedding light on the challenges faced by working-class literature and the limited representation of the dispossessed:

As for these examples of working class literature and the reality they present, the greater truth about the working classes is that the majority is silent… Can Fan Yusu represent most of the working classes? From the question, it's easy to tell that the dispossessed are mostly represented by others. Why can't they speak for themselves?...Looking at reality, we have to ask who controls our media resources? How many of the delegates at the People's Congress are truly of the People?

Chen also emphasizes both "I" and "we."

The authors provide detailed information of migrant workers' suffering and precarious lives. The essays display what do they think about themselves and society which are absent even in the migrant worker stories by the state media. While migrant workers, like the government and media articles, emphasize their hard work, they differ in their portrayal. Unlike the official narratives, migrant workers do not present themselves as resilient individuals with an optimistic outlook. Instead, they question the societal conditions they face and emphasize the frame of social injustice. To some extent, these can be considered as informal political demands and calls for social justice.

5.3. How does censorship work for the Group

Both the state critique theory and the collective action theory can help explain various elements of the observations from the data. However, I argue here that collective action theory, as well as related ideas about collectivism and activism without mobilization, have most explanatory value in answering the main research question on the functioning of censorship of the Group's publications.

On the one hand, from the perspective of state critique theory, the groups' essays would be considered unsuitable for public dissemination by the authorities, as they deviate from the government's narrative and address social injustices through alternative frames. They play a vital role in bringing attention to migrant workers who are frequently overlooked and transform their experiences into relatable elements of popular culture. (Zhang, 2023, 452). However, since these essays are published as *minjian*, they bypass the literary censorship imposed by the official publishing industry, as discussed in the literature review. This raises the possibility that the government allows the Group's productions due to their unofficial nature. However, it is worth

noting that members of the Group also share their essays on online platforms and in some cases, such as that of Fan Yusu, receive considerable attention. Online platforms are also subject to state censorship, involving monitoring individuals' online activity, issuing directives to online platforms to filter content, and detaining those who express dissenting opinions online (Roberts, 2018, 105-106).

One observation from the data might be explained by the state critique theory concept of "flooding". It appears that state media is publishing "migrant worker profile" stories, which resemble migrant worker stories from the Home in terms of their focus on migrant workers who engage with cultural productions to find meaning in their lives of hardship and struggle. Yet, unlike the Group's essays, these stories portray migrant workers without overly focusing on their sufferings, social injustices, but with positive and optimistic tones. While further research would be needed to determine whether this is indeed flooding, these stories might be indicative of government efforts of producing and distributing information to divert attention from undesirable content (Roberts, 2018).

On the other hand, collective action potential theory suggests that the Home and the Group's collective efforts to establish their own discursive space would typically result in state censorship. Especially if the government perceives that they have the potential to challenge its control over the migrant worker discourse. However, if we consider how the Group presents their essays and the Home's relationship with the government, the theory displays explanatory value.

In several ways, the data suggest that the essays by the Group adopt a social injustice frame that differs from those official government narratives, and at times the essays even express criticism of the government. These observations echo previous works in which scholars have highlighted the significant role of cultural activism and collectivism within the Home and its activities (Sun, 2012; Fei 2018, van Crevel, 2019; Ting, 2023). As shown through the selected essays, the Home and the Group raise their voices to advance migrant workers' rights, criticize government mishandlings and treatment of migrant workers, and brings attention to issues such as discrimination, inequality and injustices in society. At times, the essays appear to speak for a collective, using the "we" perspective to describe collective meanings and experiences that are representative of broader social issues and can provide insights into larger societal concerns (Ting,

2023, 334). Moreover, migrant workers involvement in the Home and in the Group often raises their activist attitudes and shifts their narratives in their cultural productions from individual to collective meanings (*ibid*, 242, van Crevel, 2023, 320). These findings are also evident in my data. The Group's use of "I" and "we," focusing on individual stories but raising collective meanings, questioning various government policies and society, and highlighting injustices and inequalities are all common features of the selected essays in this study. Moreover, there is a stark contrast between the Group's essays and the analyzed government and media articles. The articles mainly focus on the improvements of migrant workers' life with a positive tone and optimistic outlook, displaying a whole different narrative than the essays.

However, the essays often present these problems through a "human-interest" framework, focused on a personal experience, or an experience of small community of workers who are directly tied to the author through the workplace. Moreover, my data shows that while the Group's essays address issues such as inequality and poor treatment by employers and the state, such criticism often remains at a relatively high level of abstraction, rather than directly calling upon workers to mobilize or on authorities and companies to change specific policies. In doing so, the collectivism in these essays can be described by what Sun calls "activism without mobilizations" (2012). Previous research has shown that even seemingly innocuous content or content mentioning mobilization can be subject to state censorship (Pan, 2020; Gallagher and Miller, 2021). Thus, the Group's use of language and subject matter to disseminate its narratives can be seen as a signal to the state that they do not pose a threat in terms of mobilization or challenging the state's discourse, regardless of their potential for it.

In addition, the collective action potential risk is further mitigated by the Home's continuous efforts to maintain a close relationship with the government as mentioned in the literature review. The Home consistently needed to adapt its strategies and its relationship with the government to function as explored in the literature review. The Group frequently receives visits and lectures from members of state-affiliated institutions, including the Party School of the CCP (van Crevel, 2023, 326). They are occasionally invited to events organized by state cultural apparatus (*ibid*). The Home and Group members demonstrate adaptability to new political environments by aligning with official discourse when collaborating with the government in certain projects and participating in state sponsored events. These adaptation showcases their

ability to navigate uncertain terrain while exploring labor representation in post-socialist China (Zhong, 2023, 293).

While these adjustments and efforts to establish positive relationships with state institutions allow the Home to sustain their activities, the state might have an objective of maintaining social control via "welfarist incorporation" tactics as discussed in the literature review. From the perspective of collective action potential theory, the Home's close ties with authorities allow the Home to demonstrate its cooperative nature and enable the government to obtain information on the Home's activities, thereby reducing the potential for collective action. Paradoxically, it could therefore be argued that the Home's closeness to the state helps it sustain its activist spirit and collective activities.

To sum up, I propose that both theories offer explanations for how censorship works in the Group's publications. The state critique theory explains how the government indirectly censors the Group's discourse by promoting material similar in form and substance but with the mainstream narrative. Building on collective action potential theory, I posit that both the presentation of the Group's discourse and the Home's positive relationship with the government have prevented active censorship. This aligns with Gallagher and Miller's (2021) argument that it is mostly individuals or organizations who the government does not trust face censorship, rather than specific content.

6. Conclusion

How does censorship affect the ability of migrant workers in China to shape their own narratives? Discussions of topics such as labor issues, migrant workers, injustices in literature are prone to being censored in China. In this study, I used a mixture of qualitative content analysis incorporating framing theory and case study method to analyze government and media articles and migrant worker stories by the Picun Literature Group. The theoretical framework employed in this thesis consists of state critique theory and collective action potential theory. Through these theories, I analyzed data on both the state's and Picun Literature Group's narratives and sought to answer the question: how does censorship work for publications by the Beijing-based NGO Migrant Workers Home?

My findings suggest the Group tell their stories using social injustice and personal interest frames, where they express the mishandlings, inequalities and injustices in society without mentioning if their lives are improved or if the government is taking any action towards these problems. In most of the cases they question societal structures and government policies. This is contrary to the state and media articles that engage these problems primarily from social justice and economy consequence frameworks. Official narratives often focus on personal agency and positive government policies.

Previous studies explain the absence of direct censorship by pointing to the Home's lack of political demands and alignment with the government discourse. My findings suggest this explanation is insufficient, since the Home raises informal political demands and creates a discourse that diverges from the official discourse.

Based on my initial hypothesis, the collective action potential theory appears to offer greater explanatory value in this case, although the state critique theory also has explanatory value in specific aspects. According to the collective action potential theory, the government may tolerate critical expressions towards the state and its policies if these do not pose a threat to its authority. My findings align with this perspective. To gain the government's trust the Home and the Group signal that they do not pose a mobilization or collective action threat. The Home's good relationship with government-affiliated institutions, their alignment with government discourse at times needed, and their usage of the personal interest frame with hints of collectivism all add to this. However, these expressions could still be susceptible to censorship. The state critique theory suggest that the government may engage in producing and disseminating information to divert attention from undesirable content. The publication of migrant worker profile stories by state media, which bear similarities to the Group's essays but reflects the state's discourse, may be understood through this theory.

These findings should be interpreted with caution due to certain limitations. The dataset used in the analysis comprises a small number of articles, which may restrict the generalizability of the conclusions drawn regarding state and media articles, as well as the Group's publications. Additionally, the study heavily relies on secondary research material, which may introduce biases or limitations associated with the original sources.

The study highlights the intricate relationship between political power and discursive power in China, shedding light on the complex dynamics of state-society relations. The Home, benefiting from its social capital as a labor NGO, and utilizing a trust-based relationship with the state created a unique position for itself. This positioning might enable the Home to play a significant role in social change, albeit incremental, regarding the precarious situation faced by migrant workers.

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8. Appendix: Data

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