

Media Framing of Internal Immigrants: Exclusion and Sympathy towards Migrant Workers in China

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of China's internal immigrants, commonly referred to as migrant workers, in four prominent Chinese newspapers that cater to various societal groups. We conduct a comprehensive examination of 48 news articles featuring the keyword “农民工” (migrant workers) using a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods. The findings highlight a prevailing pattern where newspapers, particularly those oriented toward intellectual audiences, contribute to the marginalization of migrant workers. Unfortunately, this prevailing trend perpetuates the exclusion of migrant workers, thereby perpetuating institutional discrimination. In light of China's multicultural society, it is imperative to promote greater tolerance for migrant workers. However, it is crucial to recognize that genuine progress necessitates government intervention. It is incumbent upon both central and local authorities to actively advocate for equal treatment and integration opportunities for China's migrant worker population, as minority survival cannot rely solely on media representation.

Keywords: Media Representation, Migrant Workers, Chinese Newspaper, Social Welfare

1. Introduction

In previous centuries, various factors such as differing growth rates, economic conditions, and government policies have led to significant migrations in many countries (Huntington, 1993). The same holds true for internal migration, particularly in China, the world's largest developing nation. This has given rise to a distinct group known as migrant workers due to the substantial and frequent movement of population within China.

Migrant workers in China typically refer to individuals who have left their impoverished rural hometowns to seek employment and residence in urban areas, primarily in coastal regions. Regrettably, they often encounter unequal treatment in comparison to local citizens. The emergence of this phenomenon in China dates back to the late 1980s, largely attributed to the policy of reform and opening up in 1987. Over the past few decades, China has experienced rapid economic growth and urbanization. The number of cities in the country has surged from 132 in 1949 to 681 in 2023¹. This dramatic disparity in income and living conditions between rural and urban areas has prompted a substantial migration of rural residents to cities in search for better employment opportunities and an improved quality of life. In 1989, there were approximately 30 million migrant workers in China, but by the end of 2022, this number had skyrocketed to 295 million.²

The majority of migrant workers are engaged in arduous, low-paying, and at times perilous occupations. Despite China's commitment to equality across all social strata, migrant workers are frequently labeled and depicted as uneducated and uncivilized, often relegated to the lower echelons of society. It is important to note that public perception tends to prioritize issues that receive extensive media coverage (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Baumgartner & Jones, 1995; Zaller 1992). Consequently, topics related to migrant workers in China consistently garner significant attention and frequent coverage in Chinese newspapers.

As Brown et al., (2014: 266) highlights, there is “no single agreed definition of ‘sensemaking’.” And texts are often understood in relation to their social conditions and power relations (Ramos, 2004). Therefore, it is worth examining whether the portrayal of migrant workers in Chinese newspapers contributes to the marginalization of internal migrants in China. The study of media representation of migrant workers in China has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years. Gu, et al. (2022) delve into the perception of acceptance among migrant workers in Chinese cities, illuminating the spatially varying determinants of acceptance. Their research underscores the nuanced experiences of migrant workers in diverse urban contexts, which can offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of media portrayals in different regions of China.

In a related context, Urman, et al.'s study (2022) scrutinizes the visual representation of migrants in image web search results, emphasizing the importance of online portrayals of migrant workers. Understanding the impact of online media on public perception is pertinent to comprehending how digital platforms contribute to the image of migrant workers in a technology-driven world.

Expanding beyond the Chinese context, Tymczuk's research (2022) explores media

representations of Ukrainian labour migrants, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although focused on a different region, this work provides insights into the challenges faced by labor migrants during times of crisis. The experiences of Ukrainian labour migrants can serve as a comparative backdrop to understand how the media portrays the challenges, vulnerabilities, and resilience of migrant workers, shedding light on similar aspects within the Chinese context.

Additionally, De Blasio et al.'s research (2022) investigates the polarization and platformization of news in Italian journalism, with a specific focus on the coverage of migrant worker regularization. While the geographical focus differs, this work underscores the evolving role of the media in shaping public discourse and policy discussions regarding migrant workers. Their findings can offer valuable lessons and comparisons for understanding how media representations influence policy and public opinion in the Chinese context.

2. Choice of Newspapers and Methods Applied

This essay conducts a concise investigation of four prominent Chinese mainstream newspapers to explore how they report on the issues concerning migrant workers. The newspapers under examination are 人民日报 (People's Daily)³, 21 世纪经济报道 (21st Century Business Herald)⁴, 文汇报 (Wenhui Daily)⁵, and 羊城晚报 (Yangcheng Evening News)⁶.

People's Daily, established in 1948, is known as the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and holds a current circulation of million copies. It plays a pivotal role in disseminating the CCP's policies and viewpoints. Besides its primary Chinese edition, People's Daily has versions in multiple languages, including English, Japanese, French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic.⁷

21st Century Business Herald, first published in 2001, is one of China's largest business outlets and is considered a leader among Chinese business newspapers.⁸

Wenhui Daily, founded in 1938, has two editions—one in Hong Kong and the other in Shanghai. The version discussed in this analysis is Wenhui Daily based in Shanghai. In the 1980s, it boasted a circulation of 1.8 million and remains a significant source of information for well-educated and affluent individuals in China, especially in Shanghai.⁹

Yangcheng Evening News, based in Guangdong and primarily distributed in the Pearl River Delta area of South China, was first published in 1957 and has a circulation of 1 million copies.¹⁰

These four newspapers were selected for analysis because they represent distinct segments of Chinese society and cater to various demographic groups. Analyzing these newspapers provides a comprehensive overview of the issue at hand. Moreover, Shanghai and Guangdong, both prosperous coastal regions in China, attract tens of thousands of migrant workers annually. Consequently, the local governments in these regions have implemented numerous policies related to migrant worker issues. Thus, examining newspapers from these

areas is particularly pertinent. To identify articles related to migrant workers, the keyword “农民工”(migrant workers) was used to search the homepages of these newspapers. Twelve random articles were selected for each newspaper in 2009. The selection of newspaper articles from 2009 serves a strategic purpose within the context of this study. This specific time frame was chosen as it falls between two significant and globally recognized events: the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. While these events occurred several years ago, they remain highly relevant to the study of migrant worker issues in China. The Beijing Olympics and the subsequent Shanghai World Expo were massive undertakings that brought international attention to China and underscored its rapid economic growth. During this period, China underwent extensive urban development and infrastructure changes, which had a direct impact on the lives of migrant workers who were an integral part of these endeavours. The choice of 2009 articles allows us to capture the media’s portrayal of migrant workers during a time when their roles and living conditions were under intense scrutiny. It offers valuable insights into how the narratives surrounding migrant workers evolved in the aftermath of these two major global events, shedding light on their ongoing relevance within Chinese society.

Both quantitative and qualitative content analyses were conducted on these chosen articles. Quantitative content analysis is rooted in the assumption that the text’s meaning is explicit and evident, whereas qualitative content analysis operates on the contrary premise (Ramos, 2004). By utilizing both methods, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how migrant workers are portrayed in Chinese newspapers.

This analysis focuses on three variables: topics, news sources and attitudes towards migrant workers within these articles. The frequency of occurrence within these variables will be counted. Additionally, qualitative content analysis will be used to assess the language employed in constructing the newspaper portrayal of migrant workers in China.

3. Topics

Understanding the topics related to migrant workers allows us to discern which aspects of their lives receive the most attention in newspapers and how these issues are treated. Among the 10 topics covered in the 48 articles, “job” ranks as the most prominent, accounting for 27.08%, as demonstrated in the following table:

Table 1. Ranking of Topics Concerned with Migrant Workers in Four Chinese Newspapers

	People’s Daily	21 st Century Business Herald	Wenhui Daily	Yangcheng Evening News	Total
Job	7	4	2	0	13
Welfare	2	3	2	0	7
Education	0	2	3	1	6
Hukou*	0	1	1	4	6
Law	1	0	1	4	6
Wage	1	1	1	4	6

Disease	0	0	3	2	5
Communist Party	1	0	0	0	1
Life	0	1	0	0	1
Right	1	0	0	0	1

*Note: Hukou means registered permanent residence

In this table, we can observe that People’s Daily predominantly highlights the topic of migrant workers’ jobs, with most articles focusing on the positive aspects and prospects of migrant workers in job-seeking. For instance, phrases like “农民工自主创业 18.3 万人，创办企业 13.2 万家，吸纳就业 100.7 万人”(183,000 migrant workers have initiated entrepreneurial ventures, established 132,000 enterprises, and provided employment for over 1 million individuals) and “就业形势趋暖”(the job market situation is improving) frequently appear. However, these articles do not delve into the specific types of jobs migrant workers secure or the average salaries they earn. Moreover, when discussing why migrant workers found jobs during the financial crisis last year, they often attribute it to local governments and their policies, as seen in “广西融水苗族自治县聘请烹调专家对 50 多名苗族返乡农民工进行免费技能培训”(The local government of Rongshui, Guangxi, has hired cooking experts to provide free skill training to over 50 returning Miao Minority migrant workers). Migrant workers’ perspectives are seldom conveyed, and these articles appear to use the issues surrounding migrant workers to create a positive image of local government, leveraging migrant workers as a catchy subject without genuinely addressing their integration into urban society.

As for Hukou (registered permanent residence) is of significant concern among migrant workers. Established in 1958, the household registration system (hukou system) has historically controlled internal migration in China, effectively excluding residents who live or work outside their registered administrative boundaries from certain social welfare benefits. The local newspaper, Yangcheng Evening News, based in Guangdong, demonstrates a keen interest in the Hukou issue. The four articles addressing this topic in Yangcheng Evening News primarily discuss policies enacted by either the central or local government aimed at helping migrant workers obtain their own hukou (household registration) in Guangdong, granting them equal treatment in social welfare as local citizens. However, these articles do not provide specific figures regarding the number of migrant workers who have benefited from these policies, and the voices of migrant workers themselves remain underrepresented. While these articles exhibit some concern for the lives of migrant workers and their path to citizenship, they place excessive emphasis on the political dimension, rather than fully illuminating the real issue.

4. News Sources

By examining the sources of news articles, we gain insights into whose perspectives are prevalent in newspapers and whether they contribute to the exclusion of migrant workers in China. Among the selected newspapers, the government is the primary source of information concerning migrant workers, as depicted in table 2 below:

Table 2. Ranking of News Sources Concerned with Migrant Workers in Four Chinese Newspapers

	People's Daily	21 st Century Business Herald	Wenhui Daily	Yangcheng Evening News	Total
Government*	7	9	6	7	29
Journalists	7	6	5	7	25
Scholars	4	0	1	3	8
Migrant works	2	1	0	1	4
Enterprises	0	1	0	0	1
Market	1	0	0	0	1

*Note: "Government" means either central or local government

The primary sources of information in Chinese newspapers regarding migrant workers are predominantly from either central or local government and journalists themselves, constituting 79.41% of the total sources. This suggests that these newspapers in China tend to represent the government's standpoint rather than giving voice to the concerns of migrant workers. While many news articles may appear supportive of migrant workers, they often fail to address the genuine challenges faced by this group. Such a news framing exerts a substantial influence on newspaper readers as it not only conveys the importance of issues but also conveys positive or negative cues that shape public perceptions of events (Kaye, 1998). Mass media, as a disseminator of information, plays a crucial political role and holds a significant place in both national and international affairs (Kaye, 1998). This role is evident in these cases, where the government utilizes newspapers as a tool to construct a positive and responsible image for the public, rather than genuinely addressing the circumstances and issues of migrant workers. Frequent use of phrases like "河南省政府一位官员认为"(an official from Henan local government believes...) and "据本报记者了解" (according to the understanding of a journalist from our newspaper) is evident in these articles. The distribution of news sources in these four newspapers above shows minimal variation; they all rely considerably on government and journalist-related sources.

Furthermore, journalists have not undertaken comprehensive studies or research when crafting articles that focus on migrant workers, leading to the exclusion of the voices of migrant workers themselves. This results in newspapers presenting an image of migrant workers as a weak, impoverished, and uneducated class, as portrayed by the journalists. Most articles merely quote statements from officials and describe policies that favor migrant workers, instead of conducting multiple interviews with the migrant workers themselves.

Consequently, migrant workers are marginalized in newspapers, even in articles centered around their issues, and this exclusion extends to public attention as well.

5. Attitudes Towards Migrant Workers

News articles inevitably carry a degree of subjectivity, as they reflect the viewpoints of the journalists involved. By examining the attitudes conveyed in the selected news articles towards migrant workers, we can gain insight into how Chinese newspapers portray the image of migrant workers and how this contributes to the broader public understanding. The primary attitudes observed are “neutral”, “sympathy”, “negative” and “positive”. A majority of news articles exhibit a neutral stance towards migrant workers, focusing more on policies that favor migrant workers, as previously discussed. These are counted as “neutral” attitudes. As shown below:

Table 3. Ranking of Attitudes Shown Towards Migrant Workers in the News Articles Chosen

	People’s Daily	21 st Century Business Herald	Wenhui Daily	Yangcheng Evening News	Total
Neutral	6	6	10	5	27
Sympathy	5	5	1	5	16
Negative	0	1	1	2	4
Positive	1	0	0	0	1

The table indicates that more than half (56.25%) of the selected news articles maintain a neutral stance towards migrant workers. In other words, journalists and editors appear more interested in discussing issues related to migrant workers rather than delving into the actual living conditions of these individuals. Consequently, readers are left with an impression of how government and officials treat migrant workers, while remaining largely unaware of the daily realities of migrant workers.

However, 33.33% of news articles demonstrate sympathy towards migrant workers, primarily seen in People’s Daily, 21st Century Business Herald, and Yangcheng Evening News. In contrast, Wenhui Daily exhibits less sympathy in its news articles regarding migrant workers. Although these newspapers still depict migrant workers as vulnerable, uneducated, and disadvantaged, they exhibit more concern for migrant workers by addressing their weaknesses and genuine issues. For instance, in People’s Daily and 21st Century Business Herald: “法治漏洞不能用农民工躯体去堵”(Migrant workers cannot be used to fill legal loopholes), “谁来给深圳农民工‘作证’?” (Who will advocate for migrant workers in Shenzhen?), “农民工养老体制困局待解” (The pension system for migrant workers needs resolution), and “尽可能用公共政策, 为农民工提供力所能及的经济帮助和精神尊重” (Efforts should be made to use public policies to offer financial support and emotional respect to migrant workers). These expressions provide readers with an alternative view of migrant workers compared to the prevailing image, contributing to equal treatment for migrant workers as urban citizens .

Surprisingly, negative attitudes are identified in some articles. For example, in a statement

like “农民工法律意识淡薄，讨薪成功率不足两成”(Migrant workers’ weak legal awareness leads to a success rate of less than 20% in wage claims). When addressing the health issues of migrant workers, reasons are attributed to “接触结核病人的机会增多，机体抵抗力下降，自我防范意识薄弱”(They have more opportunities to encounter TB patients, their immunity weakens, and they lack self-protection awareness). These articles tend to blame migrant workers for their own issues rather than recognizing social responsibilities, contributing to the exclusion of migrant workers in China.

6. Conclusion

This essay examines internal migrants in China, commonly referred to as migrant workers. Four different mainstream Chinese newspapers aiming at diverse segments of society in China were selected for a brief research analysis, encompassing 48 news articles retrieved using the keyword “农民工”(migrant workers). Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods were applied in this study.

Newspapers contribute to the exclusion of migrant workers, particularly in those aimed at intellectuals. The majority of the analyzed news articles primarily emphasize the political dimensions of the issue, rather than addressing the genuine problems or living conditions of migrant workers. The prevailing images portrayed by most newspapers characterize migrant workers as weak, impoverished, uneducated, lacking legal awareness and physically vulnerable. People’s Daily does not overtly marginalize the image of migrant workers, as it concentrates more on the political aspects of the issue. Wenhui Daily and Yangcheng Evening News, focusing on stories “both sensational and of broad interest to consumers in the surrounding area, make an effort to appeal to the largest possible portion of their local community” (Branton and Dunaway 2009: 290). These newspapers exhibit an evident attempt to exclude migrant workers while also showing some concern for them.

Nonetheless, a significant proportion of news articles express sympathy for migrant workers and address their issues and social welfare concerns. These articles contribute to the integration of migrant workers into society and the attainment of their full citizenship rights.

However, the prevailing situation in which newspapers contribute to the exclusion of migrant workers accounts for a more substantial portion. This contributes to the institutional discrimination faced by migrant workers. As a multicultural society, China should foster greater tolerance for migrant workers. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the minority’s living conditions cannot only rely on the media (Riggins 1992). Both central and local governments should take concrete steps to ensure equal treatment for migrant workers in China.

This research carries certain limitations and offers room for improvement. Due to constraints in terms of time and resources, the quantitative content analysis is not as comprehensive as desired. Apart from online news articles accessible from the newspaper websites, access to the actual newspapers selected for analysis was not possible. It would have been beneficial to examine the placement of these news articles within the entire newspaper and assess their relative importance in comparison to other topics. This approach would facilitate a more comparison between news articles related to migrant workers and those covering other subjects.

Furthermore, a more comprehensive study would have involved gathering news articles over an extended period, such as an entire year, to study policies and significant issues during that time frame. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, this was not feasible.

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Notes:

1. Source: State Statistics Bureau in China
2. National Bureau of Statistics, “2022 年农民工监测调查报告” (Bulletin of the findings of the second national agricultural census), 28 April, 2023, http://www.stats.gov.cn/xxgk/sjfb/zxfb2020/202304/t20230428_1939125.html [1 November, 2023]
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