

Functions of hometown association and its role in addressing inequalities

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Abstract:

Migrant workers, who live and work in other places than their hometown, are an important part of Chinese society, and their organization of hometown associations has also profoundly affected the situation at the grassroots level in China. This study takes the hometown association of migrant workers in Guangdong Province, whose hometown is Jingyang County, Shaanxi Province, to study the functions of hometown association and its role in addressing the inequality. The results of the study shows that for these migrant workers who work at other places than their hometown, the hometown associations have played an important role in helping them in familiarizing themselves with the local environment, finding jobs, and other basic things, for instance, handling the social insurance fee. At the same time, the role the hometown association plays in the new generation of the migrant workers, the role that the hometown association plays in safeguarding their rights are also discussed. In the process of safeguarding their rights, the inequality, including the inequality between workers and the inequality between employers and workers, are greatly alleviated. At the same time, however, the inequality is strengthened as well. Studying hometown associations will help deepen our understanding of migrant workers as a group and contribute to the current lack of research on this aspect in the academic community.

Keywords: Hometown association, migrant workers, inequality

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Introduction

China's historical small-scale peasant economy and

vernacular society shaped a society of acquaintances and a situation in which "courtesy is greater than law".(Fei, 1947) The planned economy and the people's communes of the Mao era strengthened the bonds between fellow villagers. After thousands of years of strengthening, acquaintance society and

geographical relationships have become the foundation of Chinese society. With the process of reform and opening up and the germination of the market economy, the inequality between labor and capital has intensified, and the inequality between urban and rural areas has also become more and more obvious. According to Wen (2013), after the reform and opening up, the household responsibility system, which returned land to peasant individuals, actually changed China's agriculture from collectivization to a small-scale peasant economy. Although the emergence of the small-scale peasant economy has increased people's motivation to a certain extent, the poor risk resistance ability of individual farmers, and high cost of agricultural operation have led to farmers having to rent out their land and leave their villages to work. (Grossman et al. 1997) For those migrant workers who come to work in a foreign place for the first time, the unfamiliarity with the local culture, society and policies; and the exploitation of employers, for instance, deliberately withholding wages. All of them make it difficult for migrant workers to defend their legitimate rights. At this time, organizations that can bond these migrant workers together to defend their interest is demanded. At this time, geographical relations and acquaintance society enabled these workers to create organizations based on their hometowns called hometown association.

Literature Review

At present, the research on hometown associations is more focused on the hometown associations which are mainly composed of merchants, entrepreneurs and university students. (Tang, 2018; Lei, 2016; Zhang&Ni, 2006) Hometown associations that are composed of migrant workers are rarely involved. Moreover, even the few present studies to the hometown associations of migrant workers are more focus on the governance of the social instability caused by the hometown associations, for instance, the strike. (Xu, 2011; Zhu, 2008) The functions and its role in addressing the inequality, in contrast, are rarely engaged.

Methods

Despite the questionnaire survey method is widely used, it is not adapt to this study. This study requires precise and detailed information, which is difficult to be reached by the summarized answers of questionnaire, especially for migrant workers with low diploma. Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, can collect sufficient and vivid information. Thus, data collection for this study consists of six semi-structured interviews with six members of the hometown association, who cross the classes of the society, from the migrant workers to the small trader; however, most of them are migrant workers. The basic information of these subjects, including anonyms, careers, genders and ages, are shown in the appendix. To understand the

role that the hometown association plays in addressing the inequality, we designed a series of questions, as shown in Appendix. These questions are the basis of the study. It includes the functions and necessities of the hometown association. Because of the dialect issues, the interviews were finished by my grandmother, she asked the questions I designed to the subjects. The subjects approved the collection and usage of the information, including the personal information and the interview content, in this essay. Interviews took place online by the WeChat video call from the August 18, 2024 to September 1, 2024, in regard to the distance problem. After the interview, my grandmother sent the contents of the interviews by the MP3 format, and the main contents were summarized by my grandmother, and she told them to me.

The qualitative analysis was conducted throughout the study process, we analyzed the record of the interviews, and used the logical method, to induce the results we need.

Findings

By the interview, two categories of findings solve my research questions, as shown in following:

Category A : The functions(also the establishment reasons) of the hometown association

From the interviews, I figured out the functions of the hometown association, as shown in follows:

Function A

This association helps these migrant workers to adapt to the Guangdong Province, and to settle in the Guangdong by information exchange. It can make the fellows unite, and to overcome the bigger question. Here is an instance: Misaka was a chief cook in a restaurant in Huizhou, when he was 19 years old, he wanted to earn more money, at that time, the fellows introduced him to work in the Guangdong province. With the help of the hometown association, he successfully arrived in Guangdong, at the early time, the fellows communicated by the hometown association, they communicated the working situations, which company could pay higher salaries, the policies of the government, and the customs of the Guangdong Province. It helped him a lot. As Misaka said:

The hometown association must be necessary, because it helped me to avoid many possible problems caused by my unfamiliarity. And it also provided me a good platform for the information exchange and the work site recommendation. Fellows unite and help each other in the associations, to overcome the bigger difficulties.

Function B

This association provides migrant workers spiritual comforts, to help them get rid of the solitude and high psychological pressure. For those migrant workers who leave their hometown to work, the hometown bond affected

them deeply, they are tended to communicate with fellows, to relieve the solitude. As a worker, Lovelive said It is good to have a such hometown association, I knew many fellows through this association. It is lively, isn't it? We can communicate through the Jingyang dialect, it is just like I am still in Jingyang county.

Function C

The hometown associations can help the new generation of the migrant workers to find jobs in the Guangdong Province. In the hometown association, there are some members who have great guanxi net or they own a company. At that time, other members in the hometown association will entrust these members to help their sons, daughters and teenagers in relatives' homes to find job in the Guangdong Province. These members who are entrusted will also offer helps, because of the fellow relationship. As a merchant, Genshin said:

Why isn't it (It refers to the hometown association) necessary? One of my nieces took regular specialized secondary school, in this year she graduated, I wanted to take her to the Guangdong to find a job, then I asked "Who can introduce a job to my niece?" in the hometown association WeChat group. A few days later, a factory owner, who was also a member in the hometown association, contacted me, and offered a inspector for my niece. It really helped me.

Due to the above functions, the hometown associations are widely supported and existed among the migrant workers and the people in foreign lands.

Function D

The hometown association replaces the function of union and safeguards the legal rights and interests of migrant workers. After the reform and opening up, with the decline of the status of the Chinese working class and the needs of economic development. Unions, which were supposed to defend workers' rights, gradually performs no functions. At the same time, the rights and interests of workers, especially migrant workers, are increasingly violated, including but not limited to non-payment of wages and unpaid overtime work. In that case, the hometown association can organize members to make disturbances for safeguarding the legal rights. As sagiri, a worker, said:

I used to work on a construction site with fellow villagers, and the salary that should have been paid in February was not paid in May. It was useless for us to call the police and turn to union for help. So we asked for help in the WeChat group. The next day, the hometown association organized members who did not go to work at that day to gather in front of the gate of construction site and find the boss, and within a few days, the wages were settled.

Category B: The role that hometown association played in addressing the inequality

Role A: In addressing the inequality among laborers

The hometown association plays both positive and negative role in addressing the inequality among laborers.

For the positive side. For the local workers in Guangdong Province, because of the society of acquaintance, it is generally easier for them to seek positions in relatives' factories, construction sites, etc., and it is often relatively easy and well-paid positions. For non-resident workers, it is very difficult to find a similar position. This is the inequality among laborers. Under this circumstance, if you really want to ask for a similar position, there is almost no other way but to rely on the hometown association. Thus, in this sense, the hometown association alleviates inequality among workers. As Yosaki, a worker, said

The factory where I work. Those locals, what do they do? Xianzhang (a position that manages workers within an assembly line) or something. Why? Their relatives are the owners of this factory. And my position as a Xianzhang was due to the introduction of hometown association, and there was just a vacant position.

For the negative side. The hometown association organizes fellow workers to help them find jobs and protect their rights and interests. In fact, it monopolizes resources in disguise, making it more difficult for those solitude workers (workers that are not in the hometown association) to find a job, and in fact exacerbating inequality between the two workers. As Misaka, a chief cook, said

I used to talk to a co-worker when I was working in a factory. He complained to me that it was nearly not possible to work outside the hometown without the help of hometown association. The jobs that are easy to find are basically monopolized by locals and workers in the hometown association. The rest of the jobs that no one wants to do are given to solitude workers.

Role B: In addressing the inequality between employers and workers

The hometown association plays both positive and negative role in addressing the inequality between employers and workers.

For the positive role, it has discussed in the Function D of the hometown associations.

For the negative role, the It does not fundamentally change the capitalist system of exploitation, nor does it change the system of class inequality. Thus, in this sense, it does not alleviate inequality between employers and workers, but rather exacerbates it. As Hatsune, a small trader, said

When I was in elementary school, my teacher always talked about Marx and exploitation. I didn't understand it at the time, but I really understood it after I came to Guangdong to work. Although the hometown associations will defend our rights, the phenomenon of withholding wages

and unpaid overtime work is still there. The hometown association can't defend its rights every time, so it has no choice but to endure it.

Implications and Limitations

In 2023, the total number of the Chinese migrant workers reached to 297530 thousands, composing 15 percent of the Chinese population. (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023) Migrant workers often form hometown associations, which have a profound impact on Chinese society.(Wen, 2013) For such a large community and its prominent organizational form—hometown association, the profound study to it is necessary. During the study, the author is interested in the question of why the union did not play its due role and instead led these migrant workers to form hometown associations to protect their rights and interests. However, this question cannot be studied by the semi-structured interviews.

Conclusions

The findings of the study show the following conclusions: Firstly, the hometown associations help the migrant workers in the adaptation, spiritual comfort, the job findings, safeguarding the legal rights and interests, and the information exchange. And this kind of organization is commonly existed among the migrant workers.

Secondly, the hometown associations successfully alleviate the inequality between laborers. The hometown association helps workers to gain the similar job that locals can get it easily. Without the help of hometown associations, it is nearly impossible for workers to gain this kind of job. However, at the same time, due to the monopolization of resources, the hometown association makes the solitude workers difficult to find jobs. Thus, it also plays negative role in addressing the inequality between laborers.

Thirdly, the hometown associations plays both positive and negative role in addressing the inequality between employers. For the positive side, the safeguarding of legal rights of workers indeed alleviate the exploitation to workers. For the negative side, the behavior of the hometown associations to help people find jobs and so on in fact upholds the capitalist system, which is the basis of the inequality between employers and workers, in disguise.

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Appendix:

Interviewing questions:

- 1: Do you know the hometown association of the Jingyang County?
- 2: Can you introduce me this hometown association or WeChat group?
- 3: What are the things that are sent in that WeChat group?
- 4: Does this group helps you in the spiritual side?
- 5: Do you think this group is necessary? Why?
- 6: Do you think it is easier to find job with, or without the hometown association? Why?

Subject list:

Name	Hometown	Diploma	Career	Gender	Age
Misaka		Elementary school	Chief Cook	Male	48
Loveline		Elementary school	Worker	Female	45
Hastune		Middle school	Small trader	Female	32
Sagiri		Middle school	Worker	Male	20
Genshin		Elementary school	Merchant	Male	52
Yosaki	All are from Jinqvanq County	Elementary school	Worker	Female	25