

ABSTRACT OF PHD PROJECT

THE PICUN LITERATURE GROUP: CHINA'S MIGRANT-WORKER LITERATURE AND THE CITY (TENTATIVE TITLE)

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Worker literature has been a central aspect of China's cultural production since the early 20th century. The years following the start of the Reform and Opening Up policy have witnessed a revamp to this peculiar form of literary creation, mainly through the writings of rural–urban migrant workers, commonly known as *nongmingong* 农民工. Generally excluded from dominant narratives or represented only in a partial or exoticising fashion, migrant workers constitute the majority of the industrial and urban labour-force in today's China. Many of them have been using literature, in its multiple incarnations (poetry, fiction, non-fiction, etc.), to tell their stories.

The project studies the formation and development of literature by migrant workers not only as a sociological phenomenon or an expressive form of subaltern subjectivities, but also starting from its purely literary value, critically analysed in the light of its relationship with “mainstream” and historical literary tradition, cultural institutions, and hegemonic aesthetics. On this basis, the research focuses on the migrant-worker literature group established in Picun, a village-in-the-city (*chengzhongcun* 城中村) in the outskirts of Beijing. The group is analysed in its double acceptance of social space, characterised by the encounter between authors and the city's cultural establishment, and “collective” writing, where the relationship between “I” and “We” in subaltern writing finds its expression. Such considerations are further investigated through a number of individual case studies. With this, the research project aims at demonstrating that the commonly-held opposition between the high social significance and low aesthetic value of contemporary worker literature is challenged by a closer reading of the corpus, and that a rethinking of aesthetic ideology is called for.