



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The warp and weft of life: heritage and working-class nostalgia in a Chinese textile town**

Luo, X.

### **Citation**

Luo, X. (2026, June 30). *The warp and weft of life: heritage and working-class nostalgia in a Chinese textile town*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4307285>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4307285>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# **The Warp and Weft of Life:**

Heritage and Working-class Nostalgia in a  
Chinese Textile Town

Xiao Luo



**The Warp and Weft of Life:**  
Heritage and Working-class Nostalgia in a  
Chinese Textile Town

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van  
de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,  
op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr. S. de Rijcke,  
volgens besluit van het college voor promoties  
te verdedigen op dinsdag 30 juni 2026  
klokke 10.00 uur

door

Xiao Luo  
geboren te Xi'an, China  
in 1986

### **Promotores**

Prof. dr. F.N. Pieke

Prof. dr. M.F. Herzfeld

### **Promotiecommissie**

Prof. dr. P.J. Pels

Prof. dr. C. Grasseni

Dr. S.S. Kharchenkova

Prof. dr. C. de Cesari (Universiteit van Amsterdam – UvA)

Prof. dr. M. Puett (Harvard University)

Dr. P. Demgenski (Zhejiang University)

---

# Contents

---

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>1 Introduction: Nostalgia, Heritage and Class</b>	<b>1</b>
Nostalgia and Heritage . . . . .	3
Industrial Heritage and Working Class . . . . .	7
Class in China . . . . .	10
Danwei and the Working Class in China . . . . .	10
China's Shifting Class Structure . . . . .	13
Neoliberalism in China . . . . .	16
Doing Fieldwork in the Textile Town in Xi'an . . . . .	20
Dissertation Structure . . . . .	24
<b>2 The History of the Textile Town</b>	<b>26</b>
Access to the Textile Town . . . . .	27
The Birth of the Textile Town . . . . .	32
The Workers' Origins . . . . .	35
Workers from the Inner Province . . . . .	35
The Workers from Outside . . . . .	37
Dialect . . . . .	39
The Reform of the State-owned Enterprises . . . . .	40
The SOEs' Reform Policy . . . . .	40
The Reform in the Textile Town . . . . .	42
The Bankruptcy, Layoffs, and Reemployment . . . . .	44
The Bankruptcy Policy . . . . .	44
Personal Choice — Stay or Leave? . . . . .	46
Conclusion . . . . .	47
<b>3 Inside the Factory: The Past and the Present</b>	<b>49</b>
Labor Process Theory . . . . .	50

Two Factories . . . . .	51
Inside the Old Factory . . . . .	52
The Structure of the Factory and the Labor Process . . . . .	53
The Preference for Shop Floors . . . . .	58
A Female Operator's Working Day (from 7:45 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.) . . . . .	60
Inside the New Factory . . . . .	63
Changing Spatial Arrangements . . . . .	63
Estranged "Renqing Wei" (Human Touch) . . . . .	66
Tensions: "Your Face Reveals Where You Originally Come From." . . . . .	68
Conclusion . . . . .	70
<b>4 Habitus and Guanxi as Heritage</b>	<b>72</b>
Workers' Precarity . . . . .	72
Two Previous Workers Working in the New Workplaces . . . . .	74
Chen: Working in a Cell Phone Store . . . . .	74
Xu: Working in a Supermarket . . . . .	77
Changing Spatial Movements . . . . .	81
Changing Guanxi: From "Ganqing" to "Renqing" . . . . .	83
Guanxi in the Factory . . . . .	83
Guanxi in the Reform Period . . . . .	85
Guanxi in the New Workplaces . . . . .	86
Intermingling with Guanxi from the Factory and From the Current Workplace . . . . .	87
Cultural Intimacy and Guanxi . . . . .	88
Habitus in the New Workplaces . . . . .	89
Punctuality . . . . .	90
Working Hard and a Sense of Responsibility . . . . .	91
Changes of Habitus . . . . .	92
Conclusion . . . . .	93
<b>5 Strategies of Adjustments: Generations, Genders, and Friends</b>	<b>95</b>
Generational Change and Ruptures . . . . .	96
Three Generations in the Textile Town . . . . .	98
Three Generations in Yao's Family . . . . .	98
Marginality and Suzhi in the Textile Town . . . . .	101
Three Generational Identities . . . . .	104
Conjugal Relations and Gender Inequality After Danwei . . . . .	106
Lin's Story . . . . .	107
Gender Inequality . . . . .	108
The Complexity of Friendship . . . . .	111
The Strategy of Talking with Previous Workers . . . . .	111

Gatherings . . . . .	113
Conclusion . . . . .	116
<b>6 Making Industrial Heritage: Art District and Soviet-style Street</b>	<b>118</b>
The Textile Town's Art District . . . . .	118
The Birth of the Art District . . . . .	118
The Connection Between Artists and the Industrial Past . . . . .	119
From the Textile Town's Art District to the Banpo International Art District . . . . .	120
The Current Situation in the Art District . . . . .	122
The Workers' Visit to the Art District . . . . .	125
The Soviet-style Street . . . . .	127
Soviet-style Buildings in the Factory Community . . . . .	127
Making a Soviet-style Street . . . . .	129
Three Sculptures . . . . .	132
"Bureaucratic Nostalgia" and "Social Nostalgia" . . . . .	134
Whose Heritage and Whose Nostalgia? . . . . .	137
Conclusion . . . . .	139
<b>7 Sharing Nostalgia: A Retrospective Exhibition</b>	<b>140</b>
A Retrospective Exhibition in the Textile Town . . . . .	141
Reproducing Collective Memory . . . . .	141
Interaction Between Individual Memory and Collective Memory . . . . .	146
Emotional Complexity: The Combination of Pride and Loss . . . . .	148
Different Senses of Nostalgia Between Generations and Between Workers . . . . .	150
Memory, Nostalgia, and Industrial Heritage . . . . .	153
Conclusion . . . . .	155
<b>8 Another Kind of Restitution: Back to the Working Class</b>	<b>158</b>
Class Still Matters . . . . .	158
The Future of Nostalgia . . . . .	162
Industrial Heritage or Working-Class Heritage? . . . . .	165
Future Prospects . . . . .	167
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>A Chinese Characters</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>B Summary</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>C Samenvatting (Summary in Dutch)</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>D Curriculum Vitae</b>	<b>189</b>

---

# Acknowledgments

---

Go with the flow. My name, 潇(Xiao), carries the imagery of water — unhurried but persistent, deep and clear. In many ways, this dissertation followed that same logic. It did not force its way forward; instead, it drifted through curiosity and serendipitous encounters.

And if the river found its way at all, it was only because of the people who welcomed me along its banks. My deepest gratitude goes to the residents of Fangzhi Cheng (Textile Town), who entrusted me with their time and their lives. They are Xiang Han, Qiuyue Zhang, Wei Xu, Linghua Li, Congli Ma, Yuhuan Xing, Chunlu Guo, Fangxia Zhao, Gaizhen Hu, Zhuping Chen and those who are left anonymous for some reasons. I came with too many questions; you had the patience to answer them anyway. I admire the way your spirit is carried across generations, and your resilience in the face of social change. This dissertation bears my name, but it belongs to you.

I am deeply indebted to Professor Michael Herzfeld, whose presence has accompanied this dissertation across continents. We have met in the Netherlands, in China, and in Australia — and wherever we were, he brought the same qualities: sharp intelligence, warm humour, generous guidance, and an instinct for good food. His question — who is doing what, for whom, and why — became a compass. I carried into every field encounter and every chapter. He showed me what to think about and how to think, while generously allowing me to believe I had worked it out myself. For his intellect, his friendship, and his support across many years and many time zones, I am deeply grateful.

I also owe deep gratitude to Professor Frank Pieke, without whom this journey would never have begun. He opened the door, offering me the position and trusting the project before I had fully trusted it myself. Where Herzfeld pressed me to ask sharp questions, Pieke asked me to consider where those questions sat within the larger landscape of Chinese society. His commanding grasp of Chinese society and politics consistently pushed me to lift my gaze beyond the immediate scene, to situate my fieldwork within the broader currents of history and power. I am deeply grateful for his trust and his guidance.

My dissertation committee — Professor Pels, Professor Grasseni, Professor de Cesari, Dr. Kharchenkova, Professor Puett, and Dr. Demgenski — offered far more than formal reviews. Their feedback helped me to see the deeper contributions of this research more clearly, and provided valuable guidance for both its theoretical framing and ethnographic development. I am deeply grateful for their time, expertise, and generosity in pushing this dissertation further than I had imagined it could go.

This journey would have been far lonelier without the friends who walked it alongside me. Their

support and encouragement have meant a great deal to me. I am especially grateful to Siyun Wu, Xianxian Jiang, Aihua Li, Tianmu Hong, Shu-li Wang, Weiya Li, Jiyu Zhang, Fangfang Li, Risa Aizawa, Kenji Takahashi, Yuxi Nie, Alex Xue, Yuquan Chen, Zhengdong Li, Yiran Yang, and Jialong Liu. Many of them, like me, became mothers during this time. This experience did not make us strong — we were already strong — but it made us stronger still.

I would also like to thank Dr. Andrew Hodges for his thorough proofreading. His expertise as both an anthropologist and an editor greatly improved the clarity and overall quality of this dissertation.

This research was made possible by the generous financial support of several institutions. The Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) sustained my studies in Leiden; the Leiden University Fund (LUF) and the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) both supported my fieldwork in Xi'an; and the University of Melbourne generously supported my participation in academic conferences.

My deepest love and gratitude go to my husband, Lei. He started his doctoral journey later than mine yet finished first — and still pushed me forward without ever making me feel behind. He held our family together through fieldwork and writing, always caring for my everyday life and health. To Vincent and Leyou — you were born into this journey and made it infinitely more meaningful. You gave me every reason to finish.

Ultimately, I dedicate this dissertation to my mum Chi Cheng (成驰) and my dad Yu Luo (罗宇). Your love and support stayed true, no matter where I was, no matter what I chose. Writing this dissertation brought me unexpectedly close to your past. In this process, I came to better understand the paths you chose in your own lives. This dissertation is, in the end, for you.

致我最爱的父母:

无论我身在何处, 无论我选择何路, 你们的爱与支持始终如一。

---

# List of Figures

---

2.1	A map of China and the location of Xi'an city. . . . .	27
2.2	A map of Xi'an city showing the location of Textile Town (Fangzhicheng) in the eastern part of Xi'an. . . . .	28
2.3	An old map showing a railway line linked all the textile town's factories. . . . .	29
2.4	The map of No.3 Factory's xiaoqu and the socialist-style names of each building within it.	30
3.1	The landscape of the No.3 Factory. . . . .	52
3.2	Carding machine diagram. . . . .	54
3.3	The inspectors are finding defects in the cloth in the finishing room of the new factory. They are working under the special light. The finishing room in the old factory and the new factory does not have much difference. . . . .	57
3.4	The blackboards on shop floors show the results of different levels of inspections in the new factory. The old factory had more blackboards showing individual results of everyday work. . . . .	61
3.5	The Xifang Group's site and the surrounding landscape. . . . .	64
3.6	More automated equipment but fewer workers on the shop floors in the new factory, compared to the old factory. . . . .	65
6.1	The three textile machines placed in the art district. . . . .	123
6.2	The original Soviet-style buildings. . . . .	128
6.3	The reconstructed Soviet-style buildings. . . . .	131
6.4	Sculpture 1: A Soviet textile expert. . . . .	133
6.5	Sculptures 2 and 3: Two model workers. . . . .	133
7.1	The view of the exhibition. . . . .	144
7.2	Visitors looking at the "red boat" that was built out of shuttles previously used for weaving.	145