



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

Acknowledgments	viii
List of Figures	x
1 Introduction: Nostalgia, Heritage and Class	1
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
2 The History of the Textile Town	26
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
3 Inside the Factory: The Past and the Present	49
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
4 Habitus and Guanxi as Heritage	72
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
5 Strategies of Adjustments: Generations, Genders, and Friends	95
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
6 Making Industrial Heritage: Art District and Soviet-style Street	118
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
7 Sharing Nostalgia: A Retrospective Exhibition	140
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
8 Another Kind of Restitution: Back to the Working Class	158
Class Still Matters	158
The Future of Nostalgia	162
Industrial Heritage or Working-Class Heritage?	165
Future Prospects	167
Bibliography	170
A Chinese Characters	182
B Summary	185
C Samenvatting (Summary in Dutch)	187
D Curriculum Vitae	189

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