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

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## Chapter 3

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# Inside the Factory: The Past and the Present

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In this chapter, I present a shop floor ethnography to explore how the labor process can be viewed as a form of industrial heritage and how it shapes working-class identity. Workers often present nostalgia for their past experiences on the shop floor, where strict regulations and genuine relationships fostered a sense of pride as socialist contributors. This nostalgia leads them to view critically the more irresponsible and insincere practices of the present. Nevertheless, my exploration of textile workers' daily routines and activities within the shop floor environment reveals that this nostalgia is not merely a longing for a better past. Instead, it is a complex, multi-layered emotion, deeply intertwined with the intricacies of labor processes and infused with cultural, social, and emotional dimensions. I will argue that the shifts in class status create nostalgia that might diverge from the actual work experiences of that time, while also fostering a sense of class solidarity within the evolving labor process.

For textile workers, the shop floor is more than just a workspace. It is a place in which they created their own history and working-class culture, a place in which they shaped collective and individual memory, identity and belonging, and a place that combined their sense of pride and the emotionally painful, when they realized what had happened to them. Thus, if the shop floor is considered a heritage space, it is more than just an area for labor processes; it also encompasses workers' subjectivity, which plays a crucial role in shaping their working-class identity.

Following the closure of the old factory, many workers transitioned to the newly established factory, providing me with an opportunity to compare their experiences in both old and new factory environments. To gain insights into the working-class identity and the inherent nostalgia within it, I will provide a comprehensive description of the labor process. This will include detailing the product manufacturing process, outlining the workers' daily routines, and examining workers' cooperation and conflicts that unfolded within the factory. Subsequently, I will explore the shifts in workers' subjectivity within the new factory, aiming to understand how their lived experiences on the shop floor have influenced the evolving working-class identity, which has been under siege within the confines of the shop floor culture.

## Labor Process Theory

Many shop floor ethnographies have focused on labor process since the publication of Braverman's classic monograph *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism* (1998). Braverman felt nostalgia for the period before capitalism when artisans could fully control the knowledge and labor process. He asserted that workers' knowledge of the production process has been deprived because of scientific management and duplicated mechanization in the labor process after Taylorism. To reveal the "hidden abode of production" (Marx 1976: 279), Braverman (1998) offered the critical argument that the labor process involves the separation of "conception" and "execution" so that the capitalists take away workers' control of the labor process.

Despite Braverman's insight into class antagonism in the labor process, which evoked "the labor process debate" and inspired a further exploration of deskilling, his approach still had many limitations, as he focused mainly on how capitalism controlled the labor process but ignored workers' subjectivity (Meiksins 1994). Burawoy (1982) used his own experience as a worker on the shop floor to examine a critical question — why do workers work as hard as they do, and why do workers routinely consent to their own exploitation? He provided a different perspective by arguing that "consent is produced and reproduced on the shop floor," and that the internal labor market, internal state, and the global state are involved in producing consent (1982: 198). Therefore, not only is the factory a productive place, as Burawoy believed, but we should also consider workers' subjectivity within the "factory regime" in relation to three dimensions — the economic, political, and ideological — on every shop floor (1990: 39).

Many researchers then provided various perspectives on labor process theory. Lee criticized Burawoy's ignorance of gender in the labor process discussion, and asserted that workers' gender, class, and ethnicity mutually influenced the politics of production (1998: 21). She compared two factories owned by the same company, and discussed how the social organization of two labor markets differed and resulted in "two gendered regimes of production" (1998: 12), which she called "localistic despotism" and "familial hegemony." Other ethnographies have also contributed to a focus on women's subjectivities through everyday life in the factory. For example, Ong (2010) discussed how technology and assembly-line work disciplined and affected factory women during the rapid industrialization in Malaysia. Ngai (2005) described the everyday life of women workers who left the countryside and worked in an electronics factory in southern China. From such ethnographies, we can see how those female workers who experienced life struggles and difficulties — despite their being affected by the social transformation — still found strategies and ways of living a better life and adapting to change in society.

In addition, when researchers have brought gender into the labor process, the relationship between space and subjectivity has also become an important dimension. Some researchers have been inspired by Lefebvre's theory of space (1991), which argues that the real, lived social space produces people's practices in everyday life. This space becomes a set of powerful tools and strategies that affect people's thoughts and actions. Researchers have further used ethnographies to understand power relations and

the importance of ethnicity (Kim 2013) and the *guanxi* network (Zhang 2001) in the labor process. These studies consider the labor process beyond the realm of “class,” and they reveal the diversity of workers’ subjectivity through gender, ethnicity, space, *guanxi*, and so on.

In this chapter, I will bring workers’ subjectivity into the labor process to show how the workers, not only as members of the working class but also as specific individuals, have operated on the shop floor. I still think Braverman’s separation of “conception” and “execution” applies to the period of China’s economic transformation, and I also believe that gender, space, and *guanxi* play a very important role in the labor process. Therefore, in this chapter, I infuse these elements in the ethnographic section to reveal how the textile workers worked on the shop floor in both the past and present, and I summarize how changes in the labor process help us understand workers’ nostalgia.

## Two Factories: The Past and the Present

I describe mainly two factories in this chapter: the textile town’s No.3 Factory, which went bankrupt in 2008 and was demolished in 2014, and a new factory — the Xifang Group, which has integrated and reorganized the textile town’s old factories — No.3, No.4, No.6, and the Printing & Dyeing Factory. This new factory was established in 2014 at an industrial park.

The best way for me to observe the labor process is through considering “presence.” My examination of the shop floor of the old factory draws heavily on former workers’ oral narratives and materials like photos, texts, and other documents. Despite this workspace no longer existing, former workers still remembered their working and social life in these earlier times very clearly. The oral narratives of working on the shop floor give a clear picture of an everyday working environment. Thus, I will describe the labor process on the various shop floors and focus mainly on workers’ subjectivity.

As I depend on their narratives alone, it is hard for me as an outsider to understand actual practices on the shop floor. The new factory has provided me with another way to connect with the former workers’ narratives. Although it was impossible for me to visit the old No.3 Factory (because it had been demolished), my visit to the new factory at the industrial park played a significant role in helping me to understand the labor process in the textile industry. First, textile technologies are complex and professional; they require a certain level of technical proficiency to operate and maintain, and require specialized training and expertise to use effectively. Thus, it is hard to imagine how workers operate the various kinds of machinery and what production procedures are in place across the shop floors without visiting them in person. Although the new factory has more automatic machines and fewer workers than the old one, the weaving process of the warp and weft has not changed much. Second, when I experienced a working day firsthand and then wrote about it, I was able to better understand workers’ emotions and feelings linked to working under harsh conditions, which enabled me to understand their nostalgic connections and attachment to the past and this place. Third, the new factory is not entirely new because it is actually a mix of the former factories. Many workers and managers from the older factories now work in the new factory. There is a connection and something has been inherited. The workers have inherited working styles and a *habitus* based on their previous factory experience,

and they have also inherited the previous factory's traditions and cultural values. Nevertheless, these inherited experiences have also caused tensions and contradictions when the workers have encountered power struggles in the new, recombined factory.

Therefore, this chapter's ethnography has two main parts. The first part focuses on the labor process inside the old No.3 Factory. I outline the shop floor culture and environment, and I describe how workers experienced the day and night shifts on the shop floor. In this part, I state how workers operated machines during production procedures, with an emphasis on revealing the production process and the power relations between workers and machines, and the relations between workers and their leaders during the working day. The second part is based on my fieldwork in the new factory. I begin by comparing the spatial structure in the new factory with the old one, and then I show how traditions inherited from the old factories caused tensions and contradictions in the new factory.

## Inside the Old Factory

The No.3 Factory lay at the bottom of a slope called Fangsan Street (Fangsan Lu), which stood alongside other factories in a row on Fangxi Street (Fangxi Jie). It was the first textile factory in the textile town; it was established in 1953 and went bankrupt in 2008. By 2014, the majority of plants at the original site had been demolished and the factory had moved to a new industrial park.



Figure 3.1: The landscape of the No.3 Factory. Image from the book “No.3 Factory Chronicles.”

## *The Structure of the Factory and the Labor Process*

The entrance to the No.3 Factory faced Fangsan Street. This sloping street linked the workplace at the bottom of the slope to the residential area at the top. Workers walked up and down the slope every day. As soon as they entered the No.3 Factory's main entrance, they came across a two-story administrative office building. The ground floor included a security room, a maintenance room and an infirmary, while the other administrative offices were located on the first floor. Immediately behind the office building was a production area that included seven shop floors. From north to south, these were: the blowing-and-carding room (qingshu chejian), the drawing-and-roving room (bingcu chejian), the spinning room (fangsha chejian), the bobbin, the drawing-and-slubbing room (tongbingnian chejian), the preparation room (zhunbei chejian), the weaving room (zhibu chejian), and the finishing room (zhengli chejian). Here, I explain some of the crucial technical terms used in the spinning and weaving of textiles.

1. Blowing and Carding: These are two crucial steps in the preparation of fibers for spinning into yarn. Blowing involves removing dirt and impurities from raw fibers by blowing air through them, while carding involves combing and aligning the fibers to form a continuous strand, known as a sliver.
2. Drawing: This is a process where fibers are pulled and stretched to reduce their thickness and increase their length, resulting in a more even distribution of fibers and improved yarn quality.
3. Roving: Roving is a stage in the spinning process that follows drawing. It involves further drawing and twisting of the fibers to form a long, thin, and continuous strand, ready to be spun into yarn.
4. Spinning: Spinning involves twisting fibers together to form a continuous strand of yarn. It is usually done using a spinning wheel or a spinning machine.
5. Bobbin: A bobbin is a cylindrical spindle used in spinning to store and hold the newly formed yarn.
6. Slubbing: Slubbing involves twisting and drawing out two threads of yarn to form a single yarn thread, resulting in enhanced yarn strength.

The factory roof was serrated and the windows all faced north. This was done to make the most of the fact that the sun rises from the east each morning, and so the north side was relatively bright and sunny then. Equally, in the late afternoon, the sun would shine on the south, which meant that it was not too hot on the shop floor. There was a two-story building at the southern end of the factory. The ground floor housed the biggest canteen and the first floor had a meeting room. The warehouses were immediately behind the shop floors, with two rows of warehouses separated by a special railway line. This railway line, which stretched from Baqiao railway station in the north to the cement factory in the south, linked all the textile town's factories.

When trains and trucks delivered the raw cotton grown in Shaanxi and Xinjiang to the warehouse behind the various shop floors, male workers from the supply and marketing section unloaded bales and put them on the carts to send to the blowing-and-carding room. They opened bales and fed the cotton

into the blowing machine. The blowing machine would remove most of the impurities, blemishes, and short fibers in the raw cotton so that the processed cotton would be suitable for spinning. After the machine had rolled the cotton laps, male workers used roll carts to move them to the carding machines. As the sheet of cotton passed through the carding machine, it was carded by the metal teeth and then blended into slivers through many procedures that used the cylinder, covers, licker-in, and doffers. Specifically, after the cotton entered the carding machine, the licker-in performed pre-carding and impurity removal, and then transferred the cotton to the cylinder. The cylinder and cover plate area performed the carding process. The separated fibers were then taken out of the work area by the carding cylinder and transferred to the doffer, followed by being crushed into cotton sliver and wound into the cotton sliver can.

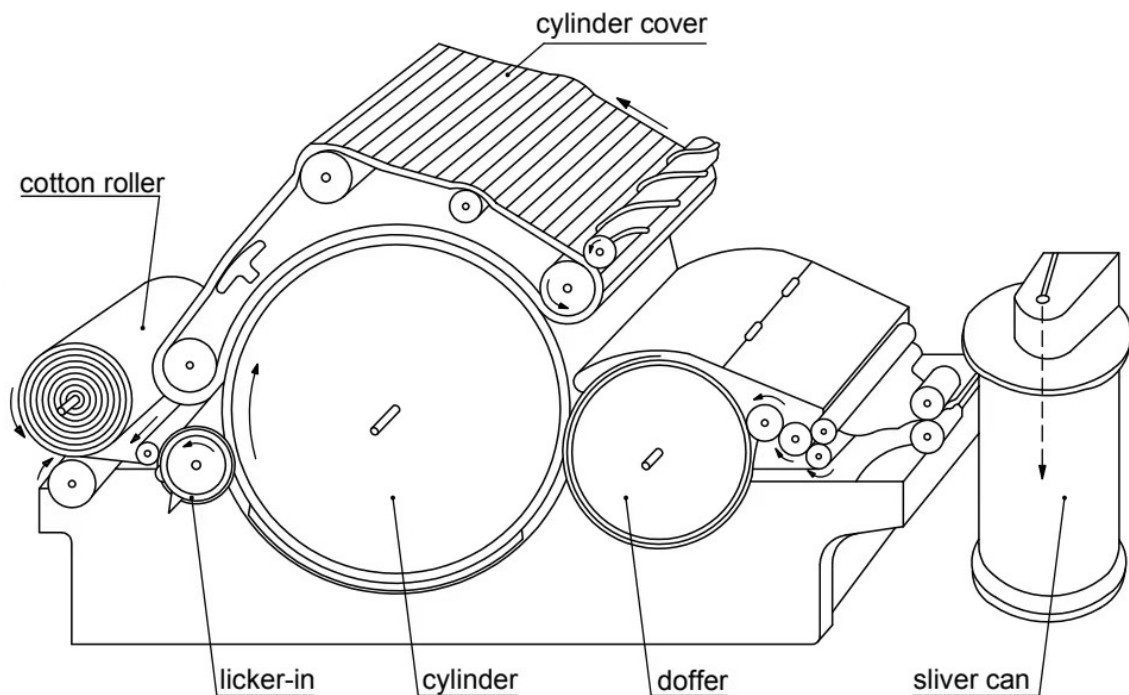


Figure 3.2: Carding machine diagram. Image rendered by Chi Cheng.

Then, the cans of cotton slivers were moved to the second shop floor to carry out the drawing and roving. Women workers put six to eight cans of slivers on the drawing machine. The drawing frame could improve the unevenness of the sliver length and thus further strengthen its thickness, so that it did not break easily. Then the slivers were blended on the drawing machine in a merging and drafting process. Finally, the laps were made into a well-formed drawing sliver that was coiled regularly in the bobbins. After that, the operators moved the bobbins to the roving frame so that the slivers could be drawn and twisted to be strengthened and prepared for spinning.

Spinning was the final yarn process in the spinning production process. Through drafting, twisting, and winding in the spinning machine, the cotton could finally meet the requirements of warp and weft tube yarns for the preparation and weaving processes, respectively. When the No.3 Factory was established, it had 50 560 spindles and reached 84 584 spindles mounted on 204 spinning frames by 2008, the final year before the entire enterprise went bankrupt. The spinning workshop was the most

labor-intensive workshop in the entire textile factory. According to the No.3 Factory's record, there were 720 workers based in the spinning room. They were grouped into fifty-two teams, including 142 male workers and 578 female workers. The spinning machine was generally large and long, and so one spinning machine could reach eighteen meters. One spinning worker was in charge of six to eight spinning machines. They walked back and forth, passing through the machines to check them and join up any broken threads. In addition, they had to replace the empty roving bobbins, and they also assisted the doffers in doffing the yarns.

The yarn from the spinning room was used as the weft on the loom directly, but the weft still had to go through several other procedures. First, the yarn had to pass through the winding, drawing, and slubbing process. Male auxiliary workers used carts to move the bobbins from the spinning room to the next shop floor. The first step was the winding procedure. Female workers placed the bobbins onto the cheese winder. Next, they used a knotting machine — the bobbin knoter — to join each bobbin yarn. It passed through the bakelite roller on the winder to form a cone many times larger than the original bobbin. Because of the machines' high speed, various fiber tissues in the yarns became attached to the cylinder, and so workers had to use a special brush to clean the kinks, knots and impurities from end to end regularly, usually every two hours.

Besides the winding process, merging, slubbing, and reeling yarn were other important procedures. A merging machine could help to merge two threads of yarn into one. Then, the yarn was wound with a roller and a special tube into a parallel cotton yarn or thread. In the winding room, a portion of corn from the winding machine was placed into the reeling machine, and it was then reeled into bunches of yarn rolls. The rolls were packed into a baler that included twenty-four bunches of rolls. And then they were packed again into larger bales, and porters from the supply and marketing section were transported to the warehouse for sale.

Then, the thread cones were moved to the preparation room before the weaving procedure began. The processes completed in this room included winding, warping, sizing, and drawing procedures. "Warping" referred to winding the cylinder yarns in parallel (that is, the required number and length of warp yarns) at the same tension and speed neatly onto the warp beam for use in the warp knitting machine. In the warping process, female workers still had to remove any defects. "Warp sizing" referred to the process of enhancing the threads to make them strong. The sizing room was the hottest room in the factory. It was often steamy and the temperature could reach forty degrees centigrade. Because of these working conditions and the labor intensity, nearly all sizing workers were male. The sizing machine could bond the single fibers of the yarn threads to increase the strength of the threads for weaving later on the loom. The sizing workers placed the warp beams on the bottom of the machine's tank, with starch used to size the warp threads.

The last step before weaving was called "drawing in." In the past, the manual drawing in of warp yarns was usually done on the drawing-in frame. After a manual separation of these tasks, the female workers used a metal hook to thread into the warp stopper and the harness eye, and then they inserted the warp into the reed teeth. Later, in the 1980s, the factory used a drawing-in machine, which could automatically perform the five basic drawing-in operations — called the yarn separation, warp stop,

heald separation, drawing in, and reed insertion — on the same machine. But for the entire time until the factory's final days of operation, there were only a few automatic drawing-in machines. Although there were only four major processes in the preparation workshop, these processes were the most critical and complex processes in the entire textile factory. The preparation workshop was the keystone of the textile factory. After all of these procedures, the warp threads were ready to send to the weaving shop floor.

The weaving room was the noisiest workshop in the factory. Although the machines in other rooms made very loud noises, the rattle of the machinery inside the weaving workshop was unbearable for factory visitors, but the weavers were used to the working conditions. When they were operating the looms, they seemed to ignore the noise, but when talking to others, they had to stand closely and shout into each other's ears.

The weaving room had the largest number of workers and machines in the entire factory. The woven fabric was made of warp threads and weft yarns, which were interwoven through the mechanical movements known as loom opening, shuttle casting, weft beating, warp feeding, and winding. The weaving room was the shop floor that delivered finished products through the upper shaft and weaving process. The blank fabric was then sent to the finishing workshop for inspection, which involved a cloth dropping process. The factories faced diverse demands for domestic and international textile specifications from the 1980s onward, and so the looms were modified and imported equipment was also introduced and installed in the No.3 Factory. Up until the bankruptcy in 2008, there were 1494 looms in total, with 363 male workers and 1108 female workers working in the weaving room.

The rolls of woven cloth from the weaving room were sent to the inspection room. Inspection rooms are often equipped with special lighting fixtures that provide bright and even illumination. In this room, female workers inspected the cloth under the light. The artificial lighting ensures consistent illumination and provides good visibility for the inspectors. The inspectors had to concentrate very carefully on the cloth, so it was easy to make their eyes tired. The inspector could find up to 200 defects in one hour and would then repair the defects on the folding machine. Finally, the cloth was packed as finished products that satisfied the requirements of the packing process, and they were finally handed over to the warehouse. Then, and only then, the entire production process was complete.

Besides the workers on the seven shop floors, certain other workers also completed very important tasks in the production process. For example, the workers from the mechanics section, the energy and power section, and the supply and marketing section also played a crucial role in supporting production. Most workers in these departments were men. Specifically, the mechanics section workers had to repair machinery and equipment in the whole factory and process machine components and accessories. The mechanics section workers often also completed technical improvement projects. The main task for workers in the power section was the repair and maintenance of power equipment, and they also took care of the production and domestic use of electricity throughout the factory. As the machines ran almost twenty-four hours a day, the probability of a machine breaking down was high, so the workers from the power section and from the mechanics section were on call at all times in order to ensure production was smoothly maintained.



Figure 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. Photo taken by the author.

Each shop floor had a signal light. The signal light system on the shop floor was designed to be highly visible and effective. The lights, which were red and approximately the size of a football, were hung from the ceiling in the center of the shop floor. In larger shop floors, signal lights were placed in front and behind to ensure all workers could see the signal. The signal light was accompanied by a loud whistling sound, although this sound could sometimes be drowned out by the noise of the machinery on the shop floors. Despite this, the bright and distinctive red color of the light ensured it

was easily noticeable. The signal light would stay illuminated for thirty seconds, providing enough time for all workers to acknowledge and respond to it. The signal light served two crucial purposes on the shop floor. Firstly, it was used to clearly distinguish the beginning and end of shift changeovers. Before the red light came on, the responsibilities of the previous shift were still in effect. Once the red light was illuminated, however, the problems became the responsibility of the next shift. Secondly, the signal light was used as a visual cue for eating times. The first light indicated the start of the break, and the second light signaled the end of the break and the resumption of work. The signal was carefully managed by the electrical maintenance workers to ensure it was turned on and off at the specified times. In the past, there had been instances where the operators were neglectful and turned the lights on too early or too late, causing disruptions in the workshop's operations.

The signal lights were not illuminated during the daily commute, as the factory's radio, colloquially referred to as "the loudspeaker," had begun broadcasting half an hour earlier. The broadcast would start with music and then proceed to factory news. As the factory was located near the residential area, the workers could listen to the news on their way to and from work. It was an effective way to acknowledge and applaud the good workers and commendable actions of different workshop teams, as propagandists from each workshop contributed these updates. It served as an encouragement for the workers to stay motivated and engaged in their work.

During the mid to late 1990s, the factory established a closed-circuit television (CCTV) center, integrating it with the existing broadcast center. The factory's CCTV center would conduct the on-site shoots and interviews based on news material provided by the propaganda departments of each workshop. The produced content would then be broadcasted. The impact of this was greater than that of the loudspeaker, and if a worker was featured on the news, it would be a topic of discussion among workers for several days. The factory installed CCTV connections in every household, allowing all families to view the factory's programs.

### *The Preference for Shop Floors*

The above description of each shop floor and the production procedures convey the textile factory's complexity and diversity. Each step had a different requirement that workers should follow to complete the tasks. Some procedures were harder to follow than others, and thus required a higher level of skill or certain physical qualities. Although the factory administration decided on the worker arrangements, this did not mean they were always satisfied with each worker's position in the factory. The shop floor and the types of work became topics that workers always discussed. During the rest of the working day, for example, on the way to the factory canteen or when walking home together, many female workers discussed who was doing the easier work and who had been allocated a harder task. They were full of envy for the less labor-intensive room and types of work. In fact, managers and directors knew the most about each room's situation, and they thus arranged for their family members or relatives to work in a more relaxed room and in more relaxed groups, and they asked the team leaders to take care of these people. Then, other workers would gossip that someone had close connections (*guanxi*) with the

factory's managers based on the ease of their work task.

Specifically, the preferred workshop for a female worker was the finishing room as it was less noisy and was a slightly lighter job. The second type of preferred work was on the carding and roving procedure, as it was a supply process and the machines could be turned off as soon as the number of slivers was great enough. They could then rest when the machine stopped. Probably the least preferred work was that on the spinning and weaving shop floors. Workers generally preferred the weaving room to the spinning workshop. Like the looms, the spinning machines' roar was too noisy, but the length of the machine was much longer than the loom. One worker was responsible for six to eight spinning machines. They would walk back and forth and constantly deal with broken ends, replace the rewind roving ends, and assist the doffers with the doffing yarn many times. After the working day was over, they felt very tired, and they could no longer move their legs. Thus, the workers would rather work in the weaving room than the spinning room.

If we exclude all these types of work, the most favorable work for female workers was at the factory laboratory. The laboratory was a very desirable department in the eyes of all factory workers. In the laboratory, the workers' daily task was to go to the shop floor regularly to take samples, return to the laboratory to carry out tests, and then to fill in the test reports. The laboratory was directly led by the factory-level department, and the managers in charge of production went to the laboratory almost every day. Because workers in the laboratory were close to the factory leaders, this meant they had control over many sources of information, and thus much gossip came from the laboratory. Many workers from other shop floors complained that the laboratory workers were very arrogant. But when other workers encountered laboratory workers, they always seemed friendly. The directors on the various shop floors wanted good relations with the laboratory workers, because no one wanted their part of the production process to be jeopardized because of problems with the experimental data. The laboratory's production index values were directly linked to the workshop's production index. Thus, the status of the female laboratory workers was very high. Consequently, almost all those who could work in the laboratory had *guanxi*, and most of the factory leaders' offspring worked in the laboratory.

The status of male workers in the power section was also relatively high. When they were called to fix a machine or equipment damaged by an electrical problem, two or three phone calls were usually not enough. Sometimes the shift foreperson or team leader went to the electrical operation room to request a personal appearance from the individual. And occasionally, they even prepared a box or two of good cigarettes for them, or made a promise to treat them to a drink after work. The head of each shop floor often had a good relationship with the electricians, because if the production target was not completed as the electrical equipment had failed, this would be a very serious matter. If they had a good relationship with the electricians, not only could they guarantee production, but the electricians could also help with electrical problems at home.

*A Female Operator's Working Day (from 7:45 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.)*

Except for the small number of workers who worked in the relatively lighter workshops, like the laboratory technicians, or those — such as the electricians — possessed vital factory skills they could leverage, the majority of workers still did very hard, basic, repetitive work, day after day. For example, here is a description of a female worker's daily routine.

*Before going to work:* She got up in a hurry at 6 a.m. Besides washing up, she also had to prepare breakfast for the whole family and awaken and dress her child. After packing everything, she walked with her child, taking about fifteen minutes to get to the factory. When she arrived, she dropped her child off at the daycare facility on the right side of the factory gate. Afterward, she hurried into the workshop's changing room to put on her work clothes. For safety reasons, she had to put all her hair into a white hat and wear an apron with the words "No.3 Textile Factory." Then she went to her post to take over from the shift worker.

*Taking over from the shift worker:* First, she had to check how the previous worker had left things. The shift handover occurred with a workshop signal. When the signal light was on, the previous shift was completely finished, and any further production and quality issues would be the new worker's responsibility. Therefore, tensions always occurred during the handover. Sometimes there were quarrels, sometimes even fights. After the shift was over, the first task was to clean the machines thoroughly and sweep up with a large brush. In this respect, the inspection was very strict; failure to meet the requirements resulted in deducted points and thus salary deductions. After the handover, she started work on her own production plan for the day. As a turner, she thought about how she could exceed production and earn the overproduction prize, how she could avoid quality problems, and how she could get on well with the team leader and the quality inspector, so as not to be deducted points during the various inspections.

*During working time:* Between them, the quality inspector, the workshop inspector, and the factory inspector carried out at least three to four inspections per day. She knew that on-shift inspections were easy to handle as they occurred on the same shift. Sometimes the on-shift inspectors would make an exception if they found problems, or even disregard the problems if they had a good relationship. But if a room-level inspector found a problem, this would be very serious. Not only would the individual be assessed — the shift and group members would also be affected. The most stressful issue was the factory-level inspection as the assessment indicators related directly to the year-end evaluation and honors. If something were to go wrong, not only would the worker lose points, the entire shop floor would be affected. Many inspections did not leave her with much time to catch her breath, and she had to focus on her work very attentively. But when the inspectors left, she found time to talk with other workers next to her. The machine would run all the time, and she felt as though she was bound to the machine. But luckily, other sister-like friends helped each other by watching the machine in between short absences, like going to the toilet or fetching hot water. She knew that building good relationships on the shop floor was crucial.

*Lunchtime:* There was a forty-five-minute break at noon when the red signal light turned on. Workers from each shop floor went to the factory canteen in turn, beginning from the farthest shop



Figure 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. Photo taken by the author.

floor. Some workers brought their own lunchboxes to save time. When mealtime began, the noise of the machines suddenly disappeared and the shop floor became quiet all at once. Nevertheless, the team leaders often used the mealtime to hold a team meeting. Their discussion focused mainly on the inspections before mealtime and the team leader further conveyed the product requirements. If the production quotas were tight, the machine would not be turned off because of the additional spinning needed.

*Before leaving work:* When the signal light in the workshop turned on after lunch, she would go back to her post to continue working. The noisy machine made an endless racket, and then work on the second half of the shift began. There was less than an hour left before work would be over, but she felt very busy and restless. On the one hand, she was preparing for the end of the shift and for the handover; on the other hand, she had to check that her output met the production requirements. If not, she would have to make a final effort. She also thought about what to do after work, including picking up her child from the nursery and cooking dinner for the whole family. At this time, the workers were easily distracted, and so this was also the time when problems were most likely to arise, including issues with production quality and even safety issues. Half an hour to fifteen minutes before the end of the shift, the next shift workers would arrive one by one and the handover procedure would begin.

When the signal light turned on, the working day was over. On the way back home, she, like certain other workers, went to pick up the children as soon as possible. Others usually walked together and shared what had happened during the working day with one another.

*Afterwork tasks:* The first task after work was to check the individual production reports for the working day. She stood in front of a large, long blackboard and looked carefully at the result. The shop floor, shift, group and individual indicators were clearly written on the blackboard. There were some other requirements before leaving the factory. Sometimes, the shift leader or the group leader held a meeting immediately after work. This would usually last between forty-five minutes and an hour. There was also a shop floor meeting once a month. In addition, if a large cultural event was being celebrated in the factory, rehearsals would be held after work. These events motivated workers highly, as these activities were closely linked to honors awarded to individuals and to each shop floor. After a long day's work, with lint all over their bodies and heads, some female workers would take a shower and change out of their work clothes. Many younger workers dressed up in their own clothes and took a stroll together.

The night shift was tough. But when the night shift was over, she could not leave. In order to strengthen workers' operating skills, the factory stipulated that after the night shift, technical practice was to be carried out on spare machines on the shop floor at 7:45 a.m. for half an hour. Personal points would be deducted if workers did not participate. The best operator presented how to operate the machine more efficiently, and other workers stood around, observing and learning. Also, the workers practiced their basic skills. For example, they stood in a circle and practiced knotting the yarn to see how many knots they could tie in a minute and what the quality of the knots was. It did not matter whether they wanted to practice or not: everyone was used to it, as it was a compulsory task. She was very tired after the night shift; all she wanted was to quickly finish practicing and go home. She recalled:

We have no complaints about the daily work. But the night work was so tough. Have you experienced the alarm clock ringing at midnight when you sleep so well? This happened twice a week. We worked from 11:45 p.m. to 7:45 a.m. It was very easy to doze off when I was doing the night shift. But I had to force myself to stay awake; otherwise, my workload wouldn't meet the standard requirements. I can't even imagine how I held up at that time.

The above description offers a snapshot of the morning and night shifts. The work process in the middle and night shifts was similar, but there were no after-hours extras on the middle shift and no meal times on the night shift. The hardest time was just before dawn, when the night-shift workers were particularly sleepy, and some workers even snoozed by the machine. The shift supervisors would walk back and forth at night to wake up the dozing workers in order to prevent them from being strangled by the equipment.

Although the daily work tasks were not easy, workers admitted that the factory did not lack a human side, and it did not only focus on production without concern for the individuals. In a socialist

factory, managers always cared about factory workers, especially when they encountered difficulties. One middle-aged woman, for example, had both family and work responsibilities. Sometimes, she asked for leave because of family issues, for instance, when an older family member or her child was sick, and she had to look after them. The shift leader and group leader not only permitted her to leave and rearrange the work tasks on those days, but the same leader also went to her home or hospital to visit her and to see if she needed any other help. The leaders at the shop floor or factory level would help workers with more complicated matters or big problems. This was a crucial activity taken very seriously in the textile factory.

The above description of the working day is not about “her” story. Rather, it portrays the experiences of thousands of workers over several shop floors and in relation to many production procedures. Although the workers always complained that they were bound by machines, they still persevered and did well in their posts. Not only did they accomplish their tasks, but they also tried to surpass the production quota. The “iron rice bowl” jobs not only provided them with a place to work, but also offered them security by satisfying their life needs, such as an allocated apartment, education for their offspring, quality health services, and retirement benefits. All these benefits provided for their welfare, and when coupled with various competitions, rewards, and penalties, they became a motivating force that pushed them to devote their whole life to the socialist construction.

## **Inside the New Factory**

Xi'an Textile Group Co., Ltd. (hereinafter referred to as the Xifang Group) is a wholly state-owned enterprise. It has integrated and reorganized the textile town's four old factories — the No.3, No.4, No.6, and the Printing & Dyeing Factory. The Xifang Group is located in the Xi'an Modern Textile Industrial Park, which was established on the Bailu plain. The 312 national highway lies in front of the factory, and it takes thirty minutes to reach it by bus from the textile town.

After the old factories' bankruptcy in the textile town, a large number of workers chose to stay and continue working in the new factory. I have discussed the reasons for their choices in Chapter Two. In this section, I will describe my personal visit to the new factory, and I will demonstrate the factory's spatial arrangement and discuss some of the tensions present in relationships that link the new factory to the old factories in the textile town.

### *Changing Spatial Arrangements*

Unlike the previous saw-tooth roof of the textile town's old factories, the new factory's roof is entirely flat and covered with air conditioning units. The layout of the new factory is basically the same as that of the previous factories here. This is because the orderly progression of the production process in a textile factory dictates such a structure. Therefore, the new factory's shop floors have the same arrangement as in the old factory, only the shop floors are now larger than before and the machinery and equipment are increasingly automated.



Figure 3.5: The Xifang Group's site and the surrounding landscape. Image from the factory brochure.

As for the machinery and equipment, from the first part of the production process onward, many machines and equipment are of the most advanced level in China's textile industry. For example, the spinning machines are larger and taller and have more spindles. Almost all looms in the weaving room are Japanese air-jet looms: the Toyota-type looms used in the old factories are no longer available. Only the finishing room is still basically the same as before, perhaps as examining cloth for defects still relies on manual work.

Although the new factory's spatial structure is similar to that of the old one, the underlying hierarchy and boundaries that the new factory establishes are noticeable. The new factory's front entrance was a long and automatic iron gate that defined a boundary between the factory's outsiders and insiders. The regulation of this boundary was rigid. I needed to ask someone who worked at the factory or show a recommendation letter in order that the door guard let me pass through the iron gate. Also, the entrance guard asked me to register my name, affiliation, and a contact number. On the first occasion, my main interlocutor, Han, took me to the new factory. While he had been a textile worker in the old factory, he nevertheless asked his former colleague Ma, who had become a shop floor director in the new factory, to permit us to enter. When not working, however, Ma took me to a side entrance and told me that I could enter via this gate as the guard at this small entrance was not strict like the guard at the front gate. After several visits, I passed through the side gate and also observed the front gate. I found that almost all the textile workers walked in through the side entrance, while the managers drove their cars through the front gate. The side gate was always open, while the front automatic entrance was always closed, except for when a car went through, and the guard used a button to open it.

The side entrance was a completely different phenomenon from the quiet, clear front entrance.



Figure 3.6: More automated equipment but fewer workers on the shop floors in the new factory, compared to the old factory. Photo taken by the author.

Textile workers laughed and chatted there when leaving for work. On one level, it was convenient for workers to go through the side entrance as its location was near the various shop floors, just as it was convenient for managers to drive through the front gate, which was close to the administrative building. The deeper reason was that the different gates divided off identities linked to different social statuses. Kim (2013) shed light on the hierarchical and discriminatory practices in a Korean-owned factory in China. He studied how spatial divisions and varying living conditions reinforce the factory's hierarchy and social distinction. In this Korean factory, workers were divided into three hierarchical groups: Korean-Chinese interpreters, urban Han-Chinese residents and rural migrant Han-Chinese women. As in Kim's analysis of the politics of division, hierarchical groups also existed in the new textile factory. Unlike the division caused by nationalism and ethnicity in the Korean factory, the division in the new textile factory was driven by differences in social and cultural identity, which were informed by historical solidarity, cultural collectiveness and work practices formed in different previous factories. The factory's spatial arrangement deepened the gap between workers and managers. There was less interaction between managers and workers, which also reduced the amount of social contact between them outside of the workplace. In contrast, the old factories only had one front gate, and everyone walked through the gate and exchanged greetings with one another. Therefore, the factory's physical arrangement in space created a boundary that led to estrangement and distance between workers and

managers in the new factory.

The spatial structure inside the shop floor was also different from that in the previous factory. In the new factory, the shop floor director's office was upstairs. From inside the office, there were no windows that looked directly onto the shop floor. Instead, the director supervised the work situation through computers on her desk. Thanks to the new technology, the shop floor director did not need to go downstairs to check on who was late or what problems had occurred — she simply saw a signal on her computer. Director Ma explained the difference between the old and new styles of work:

When I was a textile worker in the No.3 Factory, the shop floor director walked back and forth to check on our work personally many times a day. But now, you can see my computer: the red signal means that something is wrong with this machine, and the green signal means that everything is going well. I don't even need to go downstairs. If workers are not able to solve the problems, they send me pictures through WeChat [a social media application], and I show them how to do it. If there is still a problem, I then go downstairs to check in person.

In the old textile factory, the director's office was on the shop floor, very close to the machines and frontline workers. When the director had to walk in and out of the office frequently, the door was open all the time. It seemed that the small office was integrated with the machines and workers on the shop floor as an intact whole. The office was not a boundary that separated the director from the other workers in the old factory. Rather, it provided more interactions that helped the director gain a better understanding of other workers and of the production situation.

### *Estranged “Renqing Wei” (Human Touch)*

Director Ma admitted that the working conditions now were much better than in the old factory. She mentioned two important changes: one was the noise, and the other was the air quality. The air quality was better than before as the advanced equipment could deal with the cotton batting that floated in the air. In the past, there was so much cotton batting that workers often coughed or even developed occupational diseases. Also, thanks to the advanced machines, the noise on the spinning and weaving shop floors was not so great. Nevertheless, when I accessed these shop floors, I could not endure the indescribably loud racket, and I still needed to shout when I talked. Even after I left the shop floor, a buzzing sound rang for a long time in my ears. It was difficult for me to imagine workers being in such an intensively noisy environment for more than eight hours.

Although the work conditions were better, the workload was no less than before. The old factory implemented a “three shifts with four teams” model. That is to say, to ensure the factory could run continuously, the workers on each shop floor were divided into four operational teams, thereby ensuring that the production posts were occupied for twenty-four hours. The work system in the new factory continued this previous work system, but some shop floors even operated “two shifts with three teams.” This meant that workers had to work for twelve hours a day. Because of this hard workload, it was

difficult to recruit people from urban areas. Director Ma stated, “How are urban people able to bear the work intensity with so little salary? Only those from rural areas could accept such a workload.”

Technological progress is driving the pace of modernization in industrial enterprises. What surprised me a lot was that in my imagination, there were so many workers working busily in front of the machines. My speculative image was based on the old pictures and my informants’ descriptions of their previous days working at the old textile factory. The truth was that, while there were fewer workers than I thought, until I walked between the huge machines I could see some workers walking around the machines, observing, waiting, and operating the machines unhurriedly. In the descriptions of shop floors in the old factory, workers presented a very busy, lively workplace, where one worker looked after many machines using semi-automatic equipment. Nevertheless, the workers had to change the spin bobbins and fix the broken threads all the time. Nowadays in the new factory, most of the machines were automatic and imported from Germany, Switzerland, and Japan. Their quality and standards were at one of the most advanced levels in China. Therefore, the factory did not require a large workforce. Machine operators always depended on the equipment’s commands, and they used many buttons to operate the machines. Meanwhile, the shop floor directors relied on monitoring the systems via computers.

This resulted in a different working atmosphere and in estranged relationships between workers in the new factory. Director Ma mentioned the term *renqing wei* (human touch) many times:

When I was a frontline worker, I looked after three lathes. I had to walk around them. The other workers worked next to me. We called each other sisters. Yes, our relationship was like that of real sisters. Although we had quarrels sometimes, these were just for work, they were not related to the person. The shop floor was full of *renqing wei*. Most of the time, when we walked around the machine and came across others, we caught up, spoke a few words, and so on until we met again on the next round. This didn’t mean we stopped working; we chatted but we worked at the same time. We chatted about everything. Sometimes, if we went to the bathroom or got water to drink, other sisters wanted to help us to look after the machine for a while. We helped each other. Nowadays it is different. The machines are very advanced, but as you can see, the shop floor lacks *renqing wei*.

The movement in space diminished, and the distance between each worker caused physical estrangement. Thus, more independent work and less communication led to less *renqing wei*. This is a term that the former workers always mentioned. They admitted that they were very tired after a workday, but they felt it was normal and adapted to it. What they felt was memorable was the relationship between workers, neighbors, and even managers. The past was full of *renqing wei*, rather than nowadays, a time in which they felt a sense of alienation alongside other people in the new workplace. This sense of alienation could draw on Marx’s (1844) definition, as the workers felt not only alienation from machines and products, but also a disconnection from others.

*Cultural Tensions: “Your Face Reveals Where You Originally Come From.”*

The administrative building’s layout in the old and new factories was the same — both were behind the front entrance. The new administrative building had five floors, and the offices were located on the first floor to the fourth floor. The ground floor was a corridor that made it easy for people to pass through to the various shop floors directly. The new building was taller and had more offices than the old factory. When I entered the building, it gave me a similar feeling to being in a government office. There were a few people walking in the corridor. Most office doors were closed. The wall decorations displayed the honors and awards that the factory had received and of which it was proud. These decorations also introduced the factory leaders.

I went to the third floor to meet Li. She was fifty years old and used to be a colleague of Director Ma. She was chubby and her slightly curly, shoulder-length hair gave her a clean look. She had a constant smile on her face and a loud voice. Li was a staff member of the labor union in the new factory. She had also previously worked as the league branch secretary at the old No.3 Factory. When I went to her office, she was tasked with arranging the medicine. Various common Chinese medicines were carefully arranged on a long table. She explained that every summer they distributed these medicines to workers to avoid sunstroke when they worked on the various shop floors. Distributing medicine was part of the workers’ welfare activities inherited from the old factory. But the old No.3 Factory used to take more measures to deal with hot days. In addition to distributing medicines, the old factory also produced mung bean soup. The factory’s canteen used to make two buckets of mung bean soup every day, which they delivered to each shop floor and handed to the workers individually. During the 1990s, the No.3 Factory even produced ice blocks and distributed them to each family. Members of the third generation often recalled this childhood memory.

There were tensions and contradictions within the new factory. As mentioned before, the new factory was a combination of the former factories, including the No.3, No.4 and No.6 Factory. Most of the top-level management came from the No.4 Factory. Li was a staff member from the No.3 factory, and she complained that her work often encountered obstacles and did not progress well. For example, the leaders preferred to use and prioritize the employees from the No.4 factory, but they asked people from the other factories to handle difficulties. Li used the concept of a different “factory culture” to summarize these contradictions.

She perceived a divergence in “factory culture” in three aspects. First, the work style was different. In the old No.3 Factory, the managers and shop floor directors set up a space of freedom for the workers. They made few changes, and arrived at decisions at the end when workers proposed suggestions. But in the old No.4 Factory, the leaders preferred to make sure that every single step went well from the beginning and did not allow it to be questioned. In addition, the relationship between leaders and workers was different. The leaders in the No.3 Factory liked to play on the workers’ emotions. That is, when dealing with difficulties, the leaders or directors always let the workers understand what was going on, combining reasoning with emotional appeals, thus shortening the moral distance between them and the workers, in order to stimulate workers’ motivation. They showed their caring side not only in the workplace but also in relation to workers’ families, or when workers had personal

difficulties. If there was something wrong with the work, they would figure it out together and the leader would like to hear the workers' reasons. In the No.4 Factory, however, the leaders set strict rules and regulations for rewards and punishments, which everyone had to follow. If the workers operated machinery incorrectly or could not manage the workload, then they would have wage deductions, no matter their reasons. A mistake was a mistake and no excuses could be made; but conversely, if you did well, you were rewarded. The leader had the absolute authority and power to make decisions. Because of these strict rules for reward and punishment (jiangfa fenming), the No.4 Factory's achievements had been better than those of the No.3 Factory.

Thus, when the different factory culture and traditions collided, some contradictions occurred: the workers from the No.3 Factory were not used to how the No.4 Factory leaders managed the factory. Many workers from the No.3 Factory felt a sense of oppression while working. The boundary between these cultural differences placed limits on how much these factory workers could integrate. As Li summarized, "When you see someone, the first impression in your mind is that they are from the No.3 Factory, or they are from the No.4 Factory. It seems that the number 'three' or 'four' is written on your face." When she talked, she gnashed her teeth in anger and used her forefinger to point at her face. She kept saying, "Don't listen to them (the leaders) speaking of the 'fusion,' it is impossible!"

Nevertheless, some workers, like Director Ma, who was from the No.3 Factory but who later worked as a shop floor director in the new factory, took a different view and tried to understand the different strengths of the No.3 Factory and No.4 Factory working styles:

The working style is different. In the No.4 Factory, their regulation was so rigid, with no way of negotiating or muddling through. Because they rigidly followed the regulations, their productivity was higher than our factory's. Our No.3 Factory was different because we had more humanity. We could negotiate with the directors. For example, if I found a new way to promote efficiency, I could discuss it with the director. But for the workers from the No.4 Factory, they had to follow the operational procedures, with no way of changing anything. That is why our No.3 Factory always had technological innovation. But it also caused problems, like laziness among workers who always found many excuses to relax. I'm now a shop floor director. The strict regulations make it easier for me to manage the shop floor. It is reasonable that leaders ask workers to follow the rules and regulations strictly. I can understand this, but some workers from the No.3 Factory cannot adopt such a way of working.

These divergences did not only reflect different ways of working. This disagreement often caused some tension. Chen, who had been a No.3 Factory worker, was now working as a shift leader on the new factory's shop floor. Chen believed that the No.4 Factory leaders had real authority, and the No.3 Factory workers were often the target of wrongful accusations when they encountered severe problems. Chen gave me an example of how he had been treated unjustly and become a scapegoat when there had been an accident in the workshop due to the actions of another shift leader. But because that person

had a relationship with the leaders from the No.4 Factory, Chen was ultimately given the blame and felt the consequences.

These contradictions remained and it was difficult to reconcile them because of the cultural differences underpinning the new, conjoined factory. Nevertheless, the factory managers no longer seemed to care about balancing the interests of all parties. As the workers from the old factories slowly reached retirement age, they left the new factory one by one. And the newly recruited young people worked in the factory with no prior expectations, focusing only on their tasks and not influenced by the old factories' traditions. The old workers, who complained and were not well integrated, always remembered the traditions, the culture, and the friendly past relations when they worked in their respective factories. These memories thus converged into a nostalgic feeling, accompanied by various emotions, that ended their life of struggle in the factory.

## Conclusion

The varied labor process in the textile factory contributed to the complexity of working-class nostalgia. This nostalgia among the workers is a complex interplay between their actual experiences and an idealized perception of the past.

Nostalgia often entails a yearning for a past era that workers have lived through and formed memories of. This sentiment, intertwined with reality, manifests in two distinct aspects. Firstly, slight changes to the spatial layout of the new factory led to a greater boundary between workers and managers. This increased distance and estrangement caused workers to reminisce about the past, particularly the solidarity and *renqing wei* that characterized their relationships as “sisters and brothers” on the shop floor. In the previous shop floor, the supportive and caring interactions between workers and managers fostered a sense of belonging within the socialist factory, creating a bond that workers now nostalgically yearn for. Such nostalgia could encompass memories of feeling valued and respected on the shop floor, experiencing a strong sense of community with their colleagues, and enjoying a sense of security and relatively equal social status among workers.

Secondly, the traditional factory culture that the former workers inherited from their own factories generated contradictions and tensions in the working environment at the new, conjoined factory. Despite the improved working conditions and advanced, automated machines, the failure to address the underlying differences in labor processes led to a discordant atmosphere in the new factory. This prompted workers to reminisce about their past experiences in the old factory, where they had grown accustomed to its factory tradition and developed relationships with their former leaders.

On the other hand, however, nostalgia can also involve an idealization of the past, where workers selectively remember the positive aspects of a period and overlook or forget the negative aspects. For instance, while the old factory offered stability and benefits, it also had significant challenges including work pressure, physical discomfort, and inequality in the labor process. Workers were subjected to regular inspections, rewards, punishment measures, and reports on their daily work quotas, leaving them exhausted and struggling to balance their personal lives with work demands. Furthermore, the

various workers' tasks were not equal on the shop floor: the female workers who had *guanxi* with leaders could get lighter work, while the skilled male workers who controlled the resource had more bargaining power in the labor process.

The new factory presented further challenges, including division among workers from their previous factories and social hierarchies between managers and workers. It led workers to overlook the negative aspects of the old factories and idealize their memories of a better past. Thus, the sense of disappointment with the present could result in more idealized view of the past, which, in turn, can intensify workers' nostalgia as they feel that the reality of their current situation falls short of their idealized memories of the past. Therefore, workers' nostalgia is a combination of both experienced realities and an idealized world. This dynamic interplay can be a potent force in shaping workers' collective and individual memories, influencing their perceptions of the past, present, and future.