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

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Chapter 5

Strategies of Adjustments: Generations, Genders, and Friends

Imagine if you worked and lived in a place for half of your life, then one day, that place suddenly stopped providing you with a job and guaranteeing your life security. How would you feel about it, and what would you do? The policy's implementation may end after a fixed period, but the impact on the life course of those who experienced it will endure. Yurchak's book *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More* (2006) is a vivid narrative of ordinary people facing a moment of crucial change and collapse. But when you realize that what happened to you actually already exists in everyday life, then a paradox emerges: as Yurchak stated, "they had been prepared for that unexpected change" (2006: 282). Like the Soviet people, the textile workers also experienced a paradox. On the one hand, they could not imagine that the textile factories, which had been established with the founding of the New China, had closed down after more than half a century; on the other hand, they had realized long ago that the factory had been in decline since the late 1980s. The factory's benefits, the workers' welfare and salary, the impact of the national reform policy, the contract system, and the atmosphere at work, all foretold the eventual end. Nevertheless, this paradox existed not only before the factory's bankruptcy; it also lasted for a long time, and even deeper contradictions emerged when everything changed.

In this chapter, I will build up a picture of the changes to investigate the inherent paradox and its intricate dynamics. Nevertheless, my exploration will reach beyond the surface layer of paradox. I will delve into the strategies that textile workers employ to navigate these changes. Employing the term "strategies of adjustment," I intend to illuminate their paths of resilience, compromises, and negotiations as they engage with shifting circumstances within the context of social changes. Their life experiences will vividly show how the microscopic life can calibrate with the crisis, ruptures, and contradictions, while grappling with intergenerational relationships, gender dynamics, and friendships.

Specifically, I will start with the ethnography of three generations in one worker family, showing how working-class identity and belonging changed. I will employ Borneman's (1992) concept of generations with notions of crisis and rupture and show how the microscopic life histories in the textile town can calibrate both generational time and the formal time of official history. In terms of

gender relations, I will discuss changing gender roles in the workers' families, and I will present the difficulties encountered and strategies on which workers drew when dealing with such shifts. Finally, in the last section I will discuss the changing relations among textile workers after a period of working in different workplaces. I will present three instances wherein a textile worker strategically changed their ways of talking in line with whom they were talking to. Also, I will describe two events at which two groups of former workers gathered in order to highlight their strategies to deal with certain differences and paradoxes through their conversations and interaction.

Generational Change and Ruptures

Borneman (1992) explored the different life experience and kinship transformations among individuals of two generations from East and West Berlin. According to Borneman, kinship played a foundational role in shaping the constitution of "nationness" in both the FRG and the GDR. He emphasizes that the construction of kinship and a sense of belonging throughout an individual's life is deeply intertwined with their everyday experiences, playing a pivotal role in establishing the legitimacy of a state. His findings show that the two Germanies evolved as diametric reflections of one another. Specifically, during the 1950s, West Germany pursued the restoration of patriarchal kinship structures, while East Germany aimed to realize socialist principles of egalitarianism. By the 1980s, however, a shift in societal dynamics became evident: younger East Germans increasingly embraced sentimental connections, while their peers in West Germany leaned toward more practical and less sentimental relationships. The state's discourse and identity strategies, as well as each generation's reactions to these narrative tactics, vividly illustrate the nation-building process. This process involves reshaping patterns of belonging that are integral to cultivating a feeling of being "at home" in a particular place, as opposed to elsewhere (1992: 287).

Borneman's ethnographic exploration of life in two Germanies introduces fresh perspectives on the concept of generations. When considering "generations" in this context, it becomes evident that specific historical junctures significantly influence their characterization, differing from the traditional family-based understanding of generations. Consequently, the analysis of "generations" serves as an effective lens for comprehending processes of social and cultural transformation.

Amidst the recent surge in discussions regarding the concept of rupture, a deeper understanding of how Borneman's generational concept intersects with the idea of crisis and ruptures can be achieved. In anthropology, rupture is often described as a "radical and forceful form of discontinuity" (Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma 2019: 1), aptly characterizing situations where established relationships or structures are fractured. Rupture has gained attention in portraying a world experiencing disruption, including the rise of populist politics and the increasing protests and violence (Humphrey 2019). While "rupture" may initially appear to be a form of crisis, it introduces a fresh perspective, prompting us to reconsider the underlying factors contributing to social or political crises. For example, many Anthropocene scholars have adopted the concept of rupture to explore the profound nature-society crises amidst the global rise in social and environmental challenges (Mahanty et al. 2023). Furthermore,

a number of ethnographic studies consider ruptures as a way of enactment and representation, revealing the consequences that unfold during episodes of revolution, significant transformations in populist electoral dynamics, or profound spiritual awakenings. These studies highlight the moments as instances of rupture (Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma 2019: 12), such as the dismemberment caused by the guillotine during the French Revolution (Humphrey 2019) or the significance of temporal ruptures in shaping the Christian worldview and imagination (Farnetti 2019; Robbins 2007).

Ruptures also have two sides; on one hand, they signify a break with past history, but on the other hand, they also hold the promise of future change. As suggested by Rowlands, Feuchtwang, and Zhang (2019), the emancipatory and universalizing claims of civilization manifest as a future-oriented temporality, achieved through repair and rupture projects. For example, China has undergone numerous instances of redefining state sovereignty authority since 1900, highlighting that periods of repair often coincide with moments of rupture (2019: 53). It offers us insightful lenses through which to observe how ruptures impact the perception of the concept of generations.

In my fieldwork in the textile town, most of my interlocutors belonged to the second generation. This was not because they were the offspring of the first batch of workers in the textile town. Rather, they were labeled as "the lost generation" who had experienced a series of state policy changes. The lost generation, who were born in the 1950s or 1960s, were heavily influenced by the Cultural Revolution. In a response to the state's appeal of "up to the mountains and down to the villages" (*shangshan xiaxiang yundong*), approximately seventeen million urban youths were sent to rural areas. This rupture deeply affected them: it deprived them of the opportunity to continue their education, live with family members, and pursue a better life. It could be said that xiaxiang shaped a whole generation (Bonnin and Horko 2013). Nevertheless, this lost generation has been repeatedly disadvantaged by state policies over their life course. The biggest life difficulties after the Cultural Revolution occurred for them when they turned forty or fifty, a time when xiagang, or layoffs, changed their life trajectories again (Hung and Chiu 2003). Hence, xiaxiang and xiagang can be regarded as forms of dismemberment and rupture that profoundly influence the lives of individuals in this generation. These experiences contribute to shaping them as "the lost generation," illustrating how personal experiences unite with official narratives within a shared interpretive framework, effectively setting them apart from other generations.

Thus, in my study, the second generation in the textile town consists of workers who belong to the lost generation, who experienced xiaxiang at a young age and xiagang in their forties or early fifties. Their parents who came to the textile town belong to the first generation and their children belong to the third generation. Much research has provided details of how the xiagang policy affected workers' lives and workers' attitudes to the policy (Lee 2000; Cai 2006; Hurst 2005, 2009), but the research has lacked microcosmic perspectives on personal life histories during these social changes. In the following section, I delve into the ethnographic details of three generations within a working-class family. Within these narratives, each individual's lived experience serves as a microcosm of the broader generational narrative, vividly illustrating how personal experiences both mirror and contribute to the collective identity forged in the wake of cataclysmic events. These narratives come to life, particularly during moments of repair and rupture in their life courses. This examination not only deepens our

understanding of how individuals are shaped by ruptures but also underscores how these individual stories collectively guide the trajectory of an entire generation. Additionally, I will demonstrate how individuals employ strategies to adapt to profound social and cultural transformations. It is within this dynamic intersection that I uncover the intricate relationship between Borneman's concept of generations, the notions of crisis and rupture, and the calibration of microscopic life histories within both generational and formal historical timeframes.

Three Generations in the Textile Town

Three Generations in Yao's Family

Yao is a member of the third generation living in the textile town. She works as an accountant in a real estate company in a western suburb on the other side of the city. When I met her, she had returned to live in the textile town for three years. Every morning, she would leave the textile town in her Toyota, taking about one hour to drive to her office. She said she had now got used to this routine, but that she had earlier thought the textile town was in too marginal a location to get to other places in the city.

The implication of Yao viewing the textile town as "marginal" or "marginalized" incentivized Yao to study hard when she was in middle school. Her mother, Wang, who was a textile worker in the No.3 Factory often stressed her out. Yao said she always heard her mother complaining about how tough the work was on the night shift and how low the salary was during the 1990s. Wang's discontent with the situation and her resentment at being a textile worker made Wang place all her hope in the next generation — in Yao, her own daughter. Wang always reminded Yao to study hard in order to leave this place in the future; otherwise, Yao would become a factory worker like herself, which was the last thing Wang wanted. When Yao was in middle school, her mother asked her to attend extra school classes (a cram school) at weekends, and the off-campus sessions focused mainly on mathematics and English. Although there were some cram schools in the textile town, Wang felt they were not good enough, so she found better educational resources for her daughter. Yao took the bus alone every weekend. She would travel for more than one hour and then arrive at a very popular cram school on the other side of the city. Finally, Yao was admitted to a good university in Xi'an, where she studied finance and economics. She lived in a dormitory on campus, and went home every weekend. Wang was very proud of her daughter and felt that all her efforts had not been in vain. Her unfulfilled dream of being a university student became a reality in her daughter's generation.

Both of Wang's parents are members of the first generation in the textile town in the 1950s. Much of their generation devoted all their lives to China's industrial construction, which they viewed as a great mission. They made work the first priority, and they always neglected their children's education. Wang, as the first child in her family, took up the great responsibility of looking after her little brother. Wang was good at studying, but the situation in China did not permit her to continue during the Cultural Revolution. She experienced the "up to the mountains and down to the countryside movement (shangshan xiaxiang)" and had been working for three years in the countryside in the neighboring

province of Henan until this policy changed. In the early 1980s, Wang was allowed to return from the countryside, and she took her mother's place at the No.3 Factory.

At first, Wang felt satisfied with the factory job after her tough days of hard work in the countryside. But then she found the work repetitive and boring, while the night shift was tough. She then decided to take the college entrance examination. But this decision was cut short. Her parents asked her to stay at the factory, encouraged her to treasure her present work, and reminded her of the responsibility she had to bear. She knew her parents' attitude viewed sons as better than daughters. Indeed, she, as the first child in the family, was expected to take care of the others. Her brother just went to college, and he needed his sister's economic support. As her parents had retired, she had the only main source of family income, which was necessary to cover daily expenditures and her brother's study, and therein ease her parents' burden. Son preference in China is a complex cultural and social phenomenon deeply rooted in traditional beliefs, particularly the "Filial Piety" (xiaoxin) ideology. This preference originates from the strong desire to continue the family lineage and ensure economic support in old age (Wang 2005). In Chinese traditions, family lineage and ancestral heritage predominantly follow the male line, establishing the cornerstone of a patrilineal structure. This framework is deeply rooted in Confucian traditions and has played a significant role in shaping Chinese kinship patterns and social structures (Fei 1985). Despite efforts by Mao Zedong's revolutionaries to weaken the patrilineal structure, the influence of kinship organizations remained potent in China's rural areas (Wolf 1994). Even in contemporary rural China, son preference remains deeply entrenched within the framework of patrilineal family structures and practices, such as those related to village clan composition and engagement in ancestral rituals, although ongoing socioeconomic transformations, educational advancements, and gender equality initiatives are gradually diminishing its influence (Murphy, Tao, and Lu 2011).

While Wang was eager to go to college, this situation compelled her to give up that dream. Also, many years had passed without her receiving an education during the Cultural Revolution. This made it hard for her to have an even basic knowledge of many subjects, and after the heavy work, she found it difficult to prepare intensively for the examination. In addition, her parents introduced her to a man — their friend's son — as a potential marriage partner. This man was also a textile worker on another shop floor in the same factory. Both families were satisfied with this marriage, and Wang finally dedicated herself to working in the factory and focusing on her own family. She thought:

> I admit that we belong to a lost generation, but we couldn't change history, right? The only thing I could do was to help the next generation avoid such difficulties. But we textile workers are neither rich nor have guanxi; the only thing I could do was ask my daughter to study hard, to use her knowledge to change her fate. This is the only way to leave the textile town.

Wang realized that her effort along were too insignificant to contend with the fate, prompting her to resign herself to destiny ("renming" in Chinese). Nevertheless, she clung to the hope of helping her in escaping the confines of the textile town. Leaving the textile town was not only a hope that the second generation placed on the third generation — it was also a bright future for members of the third

generation who wanted to pursue it. But the idea of leaving the textile town did not occur to them at first. When the third generation recalled memories of their childhood in the textile town, this childhood was filled with happiness, joy, and freedom. Their parents were always busy with work, and so they had more time to play with their peers. In addition, they liked to stay with their grandparents who were not as strict as their parents. But this happy time was short-lived because Yao's free time was filled with an excess of homework from when she went to middle school. Then the hope of leaving the textile town for a bright future arrived along with the decline in state-owned enterprises across all of society in the late 1990s.

Yao described what she felt when she told others that she came from the textile town: *diu ren* (lose face), which means she felt inferior to others who came from middle-class families and lived in better places. Thus, she always dressed up, wore branded clothes, and put on beautiful makeup to conceal her original hometown. Yao's endeavor provided her with a good position as an accountant in a real estate company. She rented an apartment near her workplace and lived far away from the textile town.

Nevertheless, this did not mean that she cut her connection with the textile town. On the contrary, she had an emotional connection with the textile town. When she met a colleague who also came from the textile town, for example, she felt that their similar background could narrow the personal distance between them. As peers who had grown up in the same factory community, it was easy for them to find common topics and share memories. It was a reversal of sorts: during her university and early career years, her aspirations for a higher status had kept her at a distance from the textile town, but after several years of work, it seemed that she was willing to acknowledge a part of her. This indicated her desire to reestablish a connection with the textile town, a sentiment akin to nostalgia. It presents the social representation of feelings and the way these feelings influence their interactions and relationships of whom who come from the textile town and share common memory and knowledge of the past. Their shared identity demonstrates how a common nostalgia fosters a sense of belong, facilitating the repair of the connection with the textile town that had once been severed. This becomes especially evident when they acknowledge the current atmosphere in the indifferent and hypocritical workplace, making them cherish their common memories and affection from the past even more.

Also, this sense of belonging influenced Yao's marriage. Yao's husband had been her classmate in middle school. His parents had also been textile workers in the No.3 Factory. Yao met him again at a class reunion shortly after starting work, and they fell in love. At first, Yao's mother was dissatisfied because she had tried so hard to encourage her daughter to leave the textile town, but finally her daughter had married someone else who was also from a worker's family in the textile town. But because Yao's husband had a stable and decent job working in the electric power sector, and his parents were very nice to Yao, Yao's mother finally agreed with the marriage.

After they married, they lived in a rental apartment in a southern suburb of Xi'an near their workplaces. Yao's rental apartment was in a district that only had a supermarket. Yao's mother thought the supermarket food was too expensive and not fresh. Thus, she often bought fruits and vegetables at the open market in the textile town and took them to her daughter's home. Sometimes she cooked for them because the newly married couple was busy with work and had no time to cook. This situation

lasted one year until Yao's husband's family purchased a new apartment in the textile town for them.

There were three reasons for their return to the textile town. First, the textile town's apartment prices were much cheaper than those in the district near Yao's workplace. Second, the new apartment was built on the former site of the No.4 Factory, so it was very close to Yao and to the home of her husband's parents. This then saved on cooking time after work for this young couple. When the working day ended, and they went back to the textile town, it was very convenient for them to have dinner at their parents' home. After dinner, they could walk home. Two years later, Yao's daughter was born. Such a lifestyle offered them more convenience as the two families could take care of the baby together. When they worked during the day, the baby stayed with the grandparents, and at night the baby stayed with them in their own apartment. This way of living in the neighborhood for two generations provided both sides with relative freedom and independence, and they also offered reliable and trusted mutual help to each other.

Although they lived in the textile town, this did not mean that they gave up on a better education for the next generation. One day, Yao and her mother discussed kindergarten because Yao's child was nearly three and attended kindergarten. There were three kindergartens in the textile town: one belonged to a private educational group while the other two were former kindergartens that had belonged to the factory but were then nationalized when the factory went bankrupt. Yao and her mother were very familiar with these two public kindergartens because Yao was in one of them when she was little. But after they visited those kindergartens, they thought the public kindergartens' facilities had changed little in thirty years since Yao had attended. But the price of the private kindergarten was more than two thousand yuan per month — significantly more expensive than the public kindergarten, which was about five hundred yuan per month. Nevertheless, they finally chose the private kindergarten. They said, "We know the education situation in the textile town is not good as in some other districts, but since we have already settled down here, we must select the best one for our child, then she won't lose at the starting line."

Yao was not the only member of the third generation who had returned to live in the textile town. During my fieldwork, I found that although many members of the third generation worked outside of the textile town, many also lived in the textile town or close by. Yao's family is an example. It shows how the worker's sentimental attachment to the place changed. The complexity of staying in or leaving a place is not solely an individual's choice; rather, it is subject to social and cultural influences. I will utilize the concepts of marginality and suzhi to elucidate how individuals in the textile town are influenced by these ideas.

Marginality and Suzhi in the Textile Town

Marginalization is a complex and ongoing process that occurs at various levels and regions. For instance, Bolten (2012) described how the civilians in Sierra Leone accepted ex-combatants as different which resulted in their socially and economical marginalization, and the ex-combatants' rejection of manual labor and elder control, along with their adoption of reintegration discourse, lead to

their social and economic marginalization. As Harms (2011) has pointed out, however, this term lacks an active verb form and therefore may not fully capture the agency and experiences of marginalized communities (2011: 4). To address this limitation, Harms suggests using alternative terms such as "edge" and "edginess" to convey a more accurate image of the everyday realities and complexities of those living on the border between rural and urban areas, which can more accurately convey the potential opportunities and risks faced by Hóc Môn residents. Indeed, people are not marginal in themselves, rather, they are marginalized.

Kim's (2013) ethnographic study of a Korean factory in China furnishes further evidence, vividly depicting the manner in which Chinese laborers undergo marginalization. This phenomenon illustrates how Chinese laborers experience marginalization through both spatial segregation and their position within the hierarchical structure of the factory regime.

Marginalization, as applied to the textile town, was manifest in both spatial and social-structural marginalization. There is no such thing as a marginal town. Instead, a town becomes marginalized for diverse reasons, such as industrialization, urbanization, neoliberalization, or gentrification. But behind those reasons, we should first ask: who marginalizes whom, how, and why? Based on comments from my informants regarding local economic development, they expressed dissatisfaction with the municipal government's allocation of support. They noted that the government seemed to prioritize high technology and service industries in other districts, while neglecting the development of the textile town due to its perceived lack of economic potential. But when I probed deeper and asked how they came by this information, they acknowledged that it was derived from their assessments comparing the development of the textile town with that of other districts. Contrarily, local government media statements showcased substantial investments dedicated to the revitalization of this aging industrial district. Local residents, however, expressed discontentment with what they perceived as the local government's incompetence and criticized the investments as insufficient in meeting their daily needs. They concluded the discussion with the statement, "It seems to be the destiny of the textile town." The town becomes more marginalized as a result of ongoing and unsatisfactory interactions between residents and local officials, ultimately leading to a consensus where residents reluctantly accept their situation and the town's marginalized status.

Moreover, they also mentioned that the social status of being a textile worker was inferior to that of other jobs, like working in schools, banks, or high-tech companies. The textile town thus came to symbolize a "backward district" to outsiders. Being a worker entailed having a low economic and social status. Unlike the first generation, who believed that the best way for the second generation was to follow their path of becoming workers, few of the second generation wanted the third generation to become workers. Many workers themselves looked down on the atmosphere in the textile town. During the fieldwork, I often heard the second generation complain that the social ethos (*fengqi*) in the textile town was low, because, in their words, "workers' suzhi (quality) is low."

The Suzhi discourse acts as the ideological facade of a socio-political reality enforced by the Chinese party elite. This discourse encompasses the intricate facets of human quality, bolstering the government's objectives and consolidating political control over moral values and social stability. This

discourse first appeared in the 1980s and has spread from national policy to public everyday use over the last three decades. It demonstrates a shift from population quantity to quality (Anagnost 2004). As a discursive context used in governing and everyday interactions, suzhi discourse occurs in many social environments (Kipnis 2007). In the textile town, for instance, during the era of the second generation, job security within the factory was often sufficient to alleviate most concerns. By the 1990s, however, the third generation was adopted suzhi education as part of their schooling, which entailed a curriculum emphasizing not only academic excellence but also ethical values and physical education. The school took an active role in regulating students' behavior, employing suzhi discourse to underscore both rewards and penalties, thereby embedding the concept of suzhi in everyday life.

Suzhi, as a tool in the hands of the powerful, is used in myriad ways by actors ranging from the state to individuals in the textile town. From the 1990s onward, the suzhi discourse appeared in the textile factory community. On the shop floor, finding ways to improve workers' suzhi became a guiding principle, and this referred to working behavior, attitudes, and achievement. When I interviewed with a middle-level director who worked at the No.3 factory, she gave a reason why the workers' suzhi should be improved:

> The textile industry is known for its labor-intensive nature and, compared to other sectors, it has lower technological demands and fewer prerequisites for workers. So, entering the textile industry is relatively accessible. Thus, the overall educational and suzhi of textile company employees tend to be relatively low. Most have completed only junior high school, with a minority holding vocational or high school degrees. This poses certain challenges for management.

Hence, when the director oversaw the shop floor, she might readily conclude that the workers had a low level of suzhi and should work on improving it. Nevertheless, the challenge of how to enhance it posed a significant question. Consequently, even though the state had set objectives to enhance public suzhi, the factory's managers remained primarily focused on the production tasks at hand. As a result, the suzhi discourse gradually shifted towards casual conversations and lighthearted interactions in the daily routine. Workers, as well, found it hard to give an explicit definition of suzhi. But everyone could give their own view of what was "high suzhi" or "low suzhi." The workers believed that suzhi could encompass many aspects of behaving and talking. In the factory community, whispers of "someone with low suzhi" would always circulate as gossip in the neighborhood. My interlocutors complained that, for example, many workers' suzhi was too low because they played mahjong every day. Indeed, there were many workers who, after receiving their buyout compensation when the factory went bankrupt, did not look for work and instead spent their days playing mahjong and relaxing at home. When I walked around the residential part of the textile town, for example, I often heard the clack-clack of mahjong tiles in the apartment buildings. The former workers linked low suzhi with the low level of education in the textile town, and they emphasized that workers were enthusiastic about playing mahjong yet disregarded their children's education. Therefore, in the factory community, the utilization of "suzhi" as a discourse for self-deprecation, gossip, and sarcasm has evolved into a form

of "self-marginalization." Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand that this was not their true intentions. Instead, it demonstrates how the elite employ this discourse to perpetuate the marginalization of individuals who are economically disadvantaged and less educated, thereby exacerbating to reinforce their own marginality.

Three Generational Identities

- The Identity of the First Generation

As the founders of factories, the first generation of workers had a special social status. Their status was a supreme honor bestowed by the state on the industry established in the New China. Their collective identity formed as a result of their contributions to their work units and the country. In the textile town, many first-generation workers were in their eighties and nineties. When I talked to them, the topic they were most willing to discuss was their experiences in the early days of the factory's establishment. This topic not only presented the economic benefits that being a first-generation textile worker brought to the country, but it also emphasized their emotional connection with the factory, such as the fact that they had constructed many of the buildings brick by brick. Despite the hardships of the 1950s and the poor material conditions, they were very proud and full of hope at that time. Their looking back was not only a way of retracing the factory's history but also a way of emphasizing their identity, as they believed they were the most qualified to speak about the history of the textile town. The changing factory policies later on, the layoffs, and the textile town's newfound situation during the fieldwork period left them feeling pessimistic. This feeling was based on a contrast between the present and the past, which reinforced their historical contribution and their previous status, wherein working-class people were "masters" of the country.

- The Identity of the Second Generation

As the "lost generation," the second generation has experienced social suffering during their life courses. According to Kleinman (1997), social suffering encompasses the human predicaments arising from "what political, economic, and institutional power does to people, and reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems" (1997: ix). The experience of social suffering among the second generation of textile workers exemplifies how political transformation influenced their social and economic standing, ultimately leading to their social marginalization. When they deliberated on the life difficulties faced by the working class in their daily lives, Bourdieu and Ferguson (1999) illuminated how "social suffering" permeates daily existence. Their interviews with working class individuals emphasized the social divisions and sufferings of contemporary France. I encountered parallels to these descriptions in the narratives from the textile town by reading the Bourdieu team's interviews. These accounts vividly convey the nuanced details of social suffering that are embedded in everyday life. It is this enduring voice of anguish that helps to explain why the second generation of textile workers often perceives themselves as a "lost generation" (shiluo de yidai), grappling with the consequences of limited economic, social, and political influence.

In the past, workers in state-owned enterprises were given a unique and privileged status by state policy and ideology, and welfare policies offered them a sense of pride as workers. Their class identity was expressed in their identity with working-class leadership and with the sense of belonging to the work unit. After the transformation of the social and economic system, their identity underwent a new change. When the work unit no longer existed, there was a break in the transmission of working-class culture and tradition. In my field research, the second generation in the textile town had been laid off for more than ten years, and when they looked back on their experiences, they seldom complained to their units or the state, but more often complained about their "unlucky fate." They still had a deep attachment with the textile town as they had worked and lived in the community for most of their lives, and were nostalgic for a time when the factories were more efficient and had better benefits. At the same time, however, they also ridiculed themselves for the low status of being working class and were strongly opposed to their offspring becoming workers. This phenomenon vividly illustrates the Gramscian concept of hegemony, as Gramsci himself defined it as "intellectual and moral leadership" (1971: 57). In the context of the textile town, the textile workers have been willing to make sacrifices to reach a consensus with the government, acknowledging their lower social status and marginalization. This seemingly paradoxical logic shows exactly how they have used their lifelong experiences to reflect on their identity as working-class people. This willingness to conform appears to help the "hegemonic class" in maintaining a semblance of equilibrium between themselves and the subaltern classes. This exemplifies how political domination influences subaltern populations through a complex interaction of economic, political, moral, and cultural ways.

- The Identity of the Third Generation

What members of the third generation who grew up in a factory community missed the most was a carefree childhood. They remembered helping neighbors, playing each day with their friends, and living with their parents and grandparents, which all formed part of the workers' collective memory in the textile town. But after the factories had started to decline and the textile town had become increasingly marginalized, the third generation's common goal was to leave the town. Outside the town, they tried to shed the textile town's stigma and become new, urban white-collar workers. Nevertheless, they had a natural affinity with their peers from the textile town. This sense of identity was based on their common upbringing in the community and the empathy that came from a similar identity crisis when they had left the textile town. When they returned to the textile town and continued to live with their parents, the convenience of such living arrangements allowed them to ignore the marginalization and reproduce a new kind of connection. This connection, however, did not create a new sense of identity with the working class. Instead, it focused more on their own life choices. Nevertheless, the cultivation of the next generation (the fourth generation) formed a rupture with the past and the history of the textile town once again.

The above analysis clearly reveals how the sense of belonging to one generation sometimes led to a rupture between two generations. Identity, values, and relations varied from one generation to the next.

In addition, when a place was marginalized and the people were deemed "low suzhi," this also caused a break in the memory chain connecting one generation to the next. The break in affective relations also entailed a break in the transmission of knowledge. Thus, the three generations of workers' attachment to the textile town is complex and demonstrates shifts in working-class identity. To manage the generational dislocation, workers have struggled against their destiny to resist, compromise, negotiate, and seek balance in their entire life. The first generation sacrificed the "small family" for the "big family" (she xiaojia wei dajia). Here, the phrase "small family" literally means a household, including all family members. The "big family" is a metaphor referring to the collective group, which ranges from the work unit to the whole country. Their first priority was the socialist construction of the country, and they neglected the second generation's personal demands. The second generation, however, paid more attention to mutual assistance among family members, and they especially placed all their hope on the next (third) generation. After the state-owned enterprises' downturn, the work options for the third generation were different to those of their parents. Instead of being factory workers, they have made every effort to escape this marginalized place. The third generation achieved the goal of working and living outside the textile town, but many finally returned to live there again because of mutual assistance and family-related demands. This seems like a paradox on the surface, but living in the textile town became an economical, practical, and convenient way to help the third generation balance their work and life, and thus enhanced their attachment to this place.

Conjugal Relations and Gender Inequality After *Danwei*

Re-employment opportunities became available for workers after the difficult experience of being laid off. The search for jobs, however, did not go well for all workers' families. Compared with the male workers, female workers found jobs more easily. In the textile factory, most of the frontline workers were female, while their husbands were skilled workers or worked in the factory's security department. After the factory closed, many female workers found jobs in the service industry, for instance, in shopping malls, supermarkets, and hotels, or they provided household services, as there had been a rising demand for female laborers since the expansion of marketization. Some female workers even earned much more than when they worked in the factory. A female textile worker, for example, who trained as a maternity matron after being laid off, told me that she was awarded the title "golden maternity matron" and her salary was up to ten thousand yuan per month. Compared with their wives and other female workers, the male workers had difficulties finding satisfying jobs. In general, the jobs they could find were low-skilled, low wage jobs that required intensive labor. I often heard the complaint, "Besides working as security guards or repairmen, what else could we do?" This expressed their discontent and helplessness. There are many parallels here around the world — men, faced with a situation in which their wives earn more than they do find themselves to have become an object of ridicule and contempt. This challenges the dominant gender ideology, illustrating how traditional notions of masculinity impact men's social status and gender relations (Connell 2005). It also provides evidence of how gender identity is constructed and altered by social performance (Butler

1990). In China, gendered aspirations for improved economic and social status among women illustrate the impact of a market-driven, capitalist-oriented economy on traditional gender norms. Younger women have been migrating from their villages to urban areas in pursuit of better living conditions. Despite encountering challenges and enduring gender inequality, their desires exemplify the evolving ways in which Chinese women's desire and experiences have adapted in response to these changes. This transformation also prompts a deeper exploration of the broader implications for identity and subjectivity in post-socialist China (Rofel 1999, 2007).

The phenomenon wherein women's incomes have become the main economic support for their families is very common in the textile town. Do female workers improve their status and attain social equality by earning higher salaries from these new jobs? In Chinese society, economic determinism is very popular. On this view, the idea that the "economic base determines the superstructure" is a cornerstone of mainstream thinking. Within this logic, the common sense view is that when women earn more, their social status can be correspondingly improved. In my study, however, I question such a simplistic economic determinism, and I use ethnographic methods to investigate whether female workers have achieved gender equality in domestic and social life in the textile town.

Lin's Story

Lin had been working as a textile worker since 1982. After twenty-six years of work, she was laid off. Then she worked at a kindergarten for five years. After that, her friend recommended she work at an old people's home in the textile town as an office manager. She helped the director operate the old people's home. After four years in this workplace, she was promoted to vice director and managed the old people's home.

I heard about this promotion when I visited her office on the second floor of an old building in front of the old people's home. This old people's home was located in a quiet place inside the textile town, surrounded by trees and walls. It had around three hundred older people and about thirty staff members. I congratulated her and told her she deserved it because she was a very kind staff member who was attentive to the older residents' needs. Lin looked very happy, though she was too modest to admit that she was competent. She emphasized that it was just because her working attitude helped her to get the promotion. She said, "The older people are not only a group of people who need help, but they are also other people's parents; how I treat them is similar to how I take care of my own parents. If you take this working attitude, you will not find this work difficult."

One month later, however, when I asked about her recent situation, she said she had quit her job and now stayed at home to look after her mother-in-law. I felt that it was a pity that she had quit the job, but she repeatedly explained why she had given up on the promotion and quit the satisfying job. Her mother-in-law was more than eighty years old and had recently been sick, but she could not find a perfect carer to look after her. Her husband, who was a security guard in a housing estate far away from the textile town, did not want her to continue working in the old people's home. Instead, he wanted her to stay at home and look after his mother. Lin's salary was higher than her husband's salary.

But because she also received a retirement pension, even though she quit the job, the pension could assist her family as well. Therefore, her husband asked her to fulfill her filial piety (*xiaoxin*) to the older family members, and she consented. Confucianism, which has deeply influenced Chinese society, places a strong emphasis on filial piety. This core value aligns seamlessly with the patrilineal structure, where the male lineage holds authority over economic and social roles. As a result, the practice of filial piety typically became the primary responsibility of women, involving the care of the elders and thereby allowing men to maintain their economic and social dominance within the household.

Gender Inequality

Several cases, like Lin's, show that former textile women — even those who earned more than their husbands after working in new workplaces — continued to undergo a gender hierarchy that favored men within domestic life. Dinnertime conversations, for example, were always dominated by husbands, and their wives just filled the gaps in the conversation. When a wife told stories, her husband would always interrupt her, correcting the details and expressing his opinion. When I attended a family dinner party with Han and his in-laws, for example, when his wife, Yue, was describing how she had organized a dance performance with children at the kindergarten and had won a prize, Han interrupted her and asked her to speak less, as he believed that no one was interested in the details of her work.

Equal income, or even a situation in which women earned more than men, could not promote equal status in workers' families in the textile town. Instead, this sometimes increased the gender asymmetry in new ways. On the surface, husbands always neglected their wives' favorable outcomes and the confidence they gained from new workplaces. The deeper reason, however, was because their wives' success and confidence mirrored their own failure and sense of loss. Losing face (*diu ren*), a male worker told me, encapsulated what he felt as a failure to demonstrate his masculinity in domestic and public life. I knew a male worker who did a part-time job while his wife worked in a hotel as a cleaner. In his spare time, he always played mahjong with other male workers in the textile town. His wife was not only the main earner in supporting her family, but she also took care of the youth and older family members. When I asked this male worker whether he would like to ease his wife's burden, he replied with an embarrassed smile:

> At first, I was not supposed to do so, but I couldn't find a stable job: what could I do? ... I know that she has taken care of our family and our parents very well in recent years. She is good at it. I can't. I am a man, I don't have this gift. I know it is very hard for her, but what could I do? I can't find a stable job, just a casual one. When I don't work, I can't stay at home all day because it makes me crazy. As master of the family, I don't want to admit I am useless. But this is the real situation. Playing mahjong can help me get rid of this annoyance. I don't have a job, but I have friends. I can talk with them when we play. It just looks like smoking or drinking; playing mahjong is very common in the textile town.

This was his explanation. He admitted that his wife was working really hard and had contributed more

to the family, but he could not accept having lost his essential capacity of being the master of the family (*yi jia zhi zhu*).

Zhang (2001: 116) analyzed how, among Wenzhou migrants in Beijing, "control over family business, manipulation of spatial boundaries, and value transformation in women's work" interacted and affected gender relations. She focused on how spatial boundaries were socially constructed and resulted in gender inequalities forming. Although working wives played crucial roles and had a decision-making power in economic production in households, compared with their husbands' outside work, the value of wives' work was still underestimated. In Zhejiangcun, the working wives were in charge of domestic work, while their husbands were responsible for "outside work" and "men's" work. The absence of boundaries between work and residence limited the working wives' power, a process that Zhang quotes as the "domestication of production," which described the invisible, natural, and feminine domestic work.

The female workers in the textile town were very much like the working wives who were the primary producers but who still had a lower social status in their households in Zhejiangcun. Unlike those Zhejiangcun working wives whose activities were limited to the household, the female workers in the textile town moved across a wider area when they worked outside the textile town after being laid off. But why did the gender hierarchy still exist? When I talked with female workers alone, I could feel their confidence regarding domestic and outside work. Especially after they left the factory, they felt that their perspective and horizons had become wider. They told me all the details of their work and described how they had dealt with difficulties and personal relations in the workplace. But when I asked them about their husbands' work, and whether their husbands' jobs were as good as theirs, some wives remained silent; some wives were ambiguous and reluctant to tell me more about their husbands' jobs, and others complained about the current employment environment and their husband's reluctance to try to find a way forward. But in the end, most of them accepted the status quo.

In the factory community, the traditional conception of "the man is the master of a family" had been deeply ingrained in the gender relations, and they reached a consensus wherein men had decision-making powers, while women were in charge of domestic issues like taking care of family members. Although men's incomes and women's incomes were almost equal when they were working in the factory, the women still had a lower social status than the men. Thus, the principle of male household leadership became embedded in their daily practice. This is the outcome of the lineage structure shaped by the enduring patrilineal tradition in Chinese society. This consensus has continuing even since women have begun to work outside the home and have provided the main economic resources for their families. Although women have contributed more than men, the status and the traditional family ideology have not changed. Men blamed their loss on social change, and they complained that they had been abandoned by the state, which had resulted in their being laid off. But they seldom paid their wives compliments. If they did so, this would be an admission of their failure and loss of real authority.

Quarrels were inevitable, and they often occurred in the early years after being laid off. Marriage breakdown was also a common phenomenon in workers' families in the early years after the factory

closed down. I talked with a male worker whose marriage had broken up two years after the layoffs. At that time, they had to go outside the textile town to find jobs. Thus, not being in the same place, combined with the persistent poverty, had made their marriage unstable. In the end, his wife left the family for another man in a better financial position. Eight years had passed after these events when I talked with this man about his former marriage. His tone was peaceful:

> The failure of marriages for couples like us is actually neither a problem of a weak marital foundation nor a matter of who is right or wrong. In fact, it was because, as family members, we didn't care enough about each other. For laid-off workers, failed marriages have a common feature: distance. We could not see each other very often, as we went outside the textile town to work. So communication was not enough, and mutual support and understanding were not enough, and the poverty situation did not change. At last, she could not bear it, so the outcome for us was divorce. But I don't blame her.

At this moment, the man's friend, who had worked with this man on the same shop floor, interrupted him and told me his opinion. I could feel he was still angry about his friend's divorce:

> My friend is too naive and gullible. You know, women outnumber men in the textile factory. Where there are women, there is trouble. When they are on the shop floor, they like to gossip and complain about their husbands. It is hard to change one's nature. Especially when the factory closed down and she went out to work, she was very easily tempted by the world: it's full of temptations (*hua hua shi jie*). So she was unfaithful to her husband. She is a bad woman.

Divorce was widespread in the early years after the factory closed down in the textile town. But during my fieldwork I observed a declining trend in divorce rates. After the first few turbulent years, more families found effective ways of dealing with the difficulties. Like those women with whom I talked, although their husbands were no longer the breadwinners, the wives were still willing to take on economic and domestic burdens. As one woman told me, "As members of one family, we should get through all the difficulties together."

Therefore, the female workers' re-employment not only enhanced their income but also broadened their horizons, confidence, and independence. Despite this, gender inequality and hierarchy still existed in domestic and social life in the textile town. Wives' success and confidence after leaving the factory and working in other workplaces mirrors their husbands' failure and increases their sense of loss when husbands find unstable, part-time, and low-paid jobs. This contrast is probably an important factor underpinning new kinds of gender asymmetry. Even though women contributed more than men, they did not contest the gender inequality. Instead, they tried to handle the family burdens and maintain their husbands' dignity as "the master of a family."

The Complexity of Friendship

Despite the state-owned textile factory having closed down, the factory's workers still live in the factory community. While their surrounds have not changed much, the workers' life trajectories shifted when they were re-employed outside the textile town, which gave rise to new, different spatial movements. Some workers found relatively stable jobs in private enterprises, some became self-employed entrepreneurs, and others would move from job to job without a clear progression. For those people who had worked together and known one another well in the factory beforehand, what would happen when they met up nowadays? In this section, I present three encounters that show how textile workers strategically changed their way of talking depending on their interlocutor. In addition, I describe two events at which two groups of previous workers gathered, and I do this to indicate the differences articulated through the content of their conversations and interactions.

The Strategy of Talking with Previous Workers

Workers' diverse experiences in various workplaces after being laid off and re-employed may explain their changing attitudes toward previous colleagues or friends. Some people had good jobs, but others still struggled with poverty. Their economic and social status was not as equal as it had previously been on the textile factory shop floor. Thus, when they met up again, their conversational style would change to reflect this. To discuss such subtle changes and their implications, I use Han's case, which covers the following three occasions.

When I talked with Han downstairs in the yard of a residential neighborhood (*xiaoqu*), I observed the interaction when Han came across previous colleagues. There were three patterns of greeting in these encounters, as follows:

Pattern 1: if Han came across someone he knew but with whom he had had little contact for a long time (just a loose acquaintance) their greeting was as follows:

> Acquaintance: Hey, Han! How have you been recently?
> Han: Hey, Acquaintance, long time no see.
> Acquaintance: What do you do now?
> Han: (Sigh ...) I just work for others (*da gong*).
> Acquaintance: I heard from others that your job is so good.
> Han: Don't believe it, it's not as good as what you heard, I just found something I can do.
> (Then they would say goodbye to each other. This interaction would last for one or two minutes)

Pattern 2: if Han met a colleague and they had had a good relationship on the shop floor, he would volunteer more details about his own job.

> Acquaintance: Hey, Han, where are you working now?
> Han: Hey! I am working in Chanba district, in a private factory.

> Acquaintance: Are you busy? What do you do at your job?
> Han: (Sigh ...) Don't mention it, I'm too busy! I deal with Party affairs (dangwu gongzuo). There's a lot of things to do.
> Acquaintance: It sounds good!
> Han: Not at all, it's so boring!
> (Then they would say goodbye to each other. This greeting would last for about five minutes)

Pattern 3: if Han met someone who had been his close friend on the shop floor, and they had got on very well, he would usually prefer to say more:

> Close friend: Hey, Han, How are you doing? Where are you working now?
> Han: Hey! I'm still working for a private company in the Chanba district, XXX Company. I am in charge of Party affairs.
> Close friend: It sounds very good!
> Han: Not bad. What do you do now?
> Close friend: I am working in the XXX ...
> (At this moment, if someone's job sounded good, Han would ask for more details and give some feedback from his own experience. But if someone's job was not good, Han would not ask for more details, and he would also stop describing his own job.)

I told him about my observation of the subtle differences between these three kinds of occasions, and he explained the different approaches as follows:

> If your situation is better than that of others, they will be jealous of you; if your situation is inferior to that of others, they will look down on you.

Han's strategy in conversations shifted depending on the specific former workers he met. As he said, if their situation was not as good as his, he would not give them more details about his job, for fear that they would be envious of him. His goal was to avoid others' envy. Equally, if his job was not good as that of others, he would offer more details and even exaggerate the importance of his job to place it on an even footing with that of others, so that they would not look down on him.

Han's strategy of maintaining an equal position with others can be linked to wider cultural logics, such as the desire for social harmony and conflict avoidance. For example, interpersonal harmony reflects the core principles of Confucianism, which has influenced the attitudes of Chinese people towards social interaction (Bond 1996; Ge 2020). Moreover, this approach to social interactions may also stem from a collectivist mindset, which is linked to socialist values that emphasize economic egalitarianism and democracy in both the economic and political realms, as asserted by Christensen (1998: 348).

Han's method of balancing equal relations was not static or one-size-fits-all; rather, it was a dynamic process that considered others' work and life situations. The conversation strategies had two tendencies: one of modest understatement, and one of exaggeration. When people were modest and

understated the importance of their jobs, they could avoid unnecessary trouble. Those workers who could only find temporary, casual, and part-time jobs always relied on others to recommend them for jobs. Thus, they would ask for help from someone with a better job and more guanxi. In this situation, well-connected workers (such as Han) with better jobs were reluctant to provide help because they had no expectation of reciprocity. Thus, they understated the importance of their jobs in order to avoid such embarrassment. Equally, by intentionally exaggerating one's job, a person could save face, or in Han's words, "maintain their dignity." In the past, for instance, Han had been a foreman on the shop floor, so the frontline workers had had to follow his instructions. Nowadays, however, one frontline worker had a better job, and this person's social status and economic condition were better than Han's. In this situation, Han exaggerated the importance of his work for fear that he would lose his standing as former foreman. Although the circumstances changed with the passage of time, Han still viewed maintaining his dignity as a priority. Thus, conversation strategies with former colleagues and friends formed a dynamic process that was calibrated to the specific situation and moment.

In the past, the former factory workers had not been so significantly separated economically and socially from one another. Now, however, they experienced the inevitable trend of widening the gap in the uncertain labor market. Although they still lived in the former factory neighborhood, they had fewer opportunities to meet one another because they were all busy working outside the textile town. But since they still lived in this factory community, they all still knew one another. Information about jobs would travel very fast in this acquaintance-based society. When former colleagues and friends came across the factory community and began talking, even if they had not met for a long while, they would still share details about their current situation, and strategies like the above were present in the conversations.

Gatherings

I attended some parties organized by the retired workers. The most frequent reason for these gatherings was that when workers reached retirement age and could access the social welfare system, their good friends from the factory community would ask for an invitation to a restaurant to celebrate this significant life moment with them. These gatherings were always small, often just including five or six workers. The invitees were the inviter's former colleagues or good friends with whom they had worked for a long time. One textile worker described this sisterlike relationship:

> We came from the same team when we worked on the textile shop floor. When we got off the night shift, we still had lots of energy. We took the No.8 bus together to the inner city. We didn't buy anything but just hung around. After everyone got married and had children, we still helped each other. We were sisters. Since the layoffs, we have been working in different places. Everyone is too busy to see anyone else. Even so, we still find excuses to get together. For instance, when someone reaches retirement age, gets an increased retirement pension, has children getting married, or has grandchildren, any of

> these events could prompt us to organize a gathering. If we have time and want to get together, we can always find reasons. We meet up two or three times a year.

These gatherings always occurred in restaurants inside the textile town. The gatherings happened on weekends, and the restaurants were close to where they lived. The workers took turns at paying the bill. Hotpot was the favored meal at these workers' gatherings, not only due to its affordability but also because it allowed workers to convene around a communal pot, cook their preferred ingredients, and engage in lively conversations while relishing their food. The atmosphere in the hotpot restaurants was lively and not too formal, which helped them feel relaxed and cozy when chatting. The entire gathering was full of talking and laughing, with rarely a moment of silence. The topics discussed were not fixed — they would often chat about their appearance, family members, job, and other people's lives. At the gathering, they always recalled previous experiences and compared them with the current situation.

Nevertheless, how they talked and interacted demonstrated differences between various groups of workers. I attended two gatherings with two different groups of workers: one consisted of frontline workers from the same team, and the other one consisted of middle-level managers on one shop floor.

I accompanied Xu to her frontline workers' gathering in a hotpot restaurant two blocks away from the factory community. Xu was a little bit overweight: she had chubby cheeks, big eyes, and a kind smile whenever she spoke. Before we headed to the restaurant, I asked her what she planned to wear to dress up for the occasion. But she felt confused by my comment and asked me why she needed to dress up. She joked that she was not going on a date, but that she was just going to see her old friends who had known one another for several decades. So, she dressed in her everyday clothes: a black short-sleeved shirt and brown pants. When everyone met in the restaurant, the group members made jokes and laughed at each other. They criticized one another's appearance and a comment on body shape formed their first interaction. When one of Xu's friends saw her, she laughed at Xu and said, "You look fatter, why don't you lose some weight?" She paused, then continued, "Your skin is not smooth and looks older, why don't you go to a beauty salon?"

Xu did not get angry at all, but replied to her friend, "Fatter means life is better, you still look thin — why don't you take good care of yourself?" Then they laughed together. They then discussed their breasts and which kind of bra was good for their respective shapes, and they even showed one another their bras under the table. At first, when I heard them talking, I felt a little embarrassed. But, as I observed everyone expressing their joy and friendship in this manner, I came to realize that it was not a satirical interaction; instead, it was a way of expressing their close friendship and sisterlike intimacy. This intimacy that made me feel embarrassed but that allowed them to feel relaxed quickly returned a sense of a close friendship to them, despite their not having met up for a long while.

Compared with the frontline workers' gathering, the gathering of former middle-level managers was rather different. Han retired in September 2018. When handling the formalities, his former colleagues from the factory community asked him to invite them for dinner to celebrate his retirement. Besides Han and one other male worker, the remaining five workers were female. None of them had been frontline workers — they had all worked in the same office on the shop floor. When they met up,

their style of communication was different to that of the frontline workers who had laughed at one another. In contrast, these female workers began by complimenting each other on their appearance, with comments such as "Your coat looks smart, where did you buy it? How much was it?" or "You changed your hairstyle, it looks younger and suits you well!" While these conversations were different from how the frontline workers expressed themselves, they also put everyone in a good mood and everyone was very excited to meet up. I noticed that unlike the frontline workers, who wore T-shirts and pants, they dressed more formally, for instance, the women wore colorful dresses with boots or leather shoes, and light makeup.

The whole atmosphere at the frontline workers' gathering was more relaxed and less restrained than the middle-level managers' gathering. When eating, the main topics focused on their work and life. The frontline workers knew the details about one another's current work. After they had left the factory, they had found similar jobs, mostly in the services market, such as working in shopping centers, restaurants, supermarkets, or hotels. Thus, they had similar experiences, difficulties, and strategies that they shared with one another. When one person complained about her work, for example, another would echo the sentiment and let the first person continue venting her grievances. Others would then give some advice or complain about their own difficulties. Complaints about current jobs and colleagues formed one of the most welcomed topics at these gatherings. They shared views on the inequalities they had encountered in workplaces, and gave advice to one another on dealing with difficult situations and people they disliked. This could enhance their friendship, as in their words, "True friendship stands out in difficult times." Complaints about marriage partners formed another common topic. They complained that their husbands were lazy or useless, and that the pressure the family put them under was heavy. The content of complaints also expanded to include economic tensions with relatives, their children's education, and the situation and difficulties they were currently encountering. It seemed that these complaints strengthened their friendship and sisterly sentiment through sharing their experience and feelings. Furthermore, the complaints also helped them to recall how stable their previous work in the factory had been, how proud they had been to possess a sense of belonging to the working class, and how easy getting along with the other workers on the shop floor had been. Gathering in this way provoked a collective nostalgia, which was manifest in the comparison between the past and the present situation.

But the topics discussed by the middle-level managers did not go any further. They were sensitive about their current jobs. Some had good jobs while others did not. Thus, engaging in such conversations, especially if one boasted of having landed an especially good job, might have triggered greater discomfort than would have been the case in the old factory setting. Discussions about jobs did not seem to be as informal and casual as the discussions about appearance they had had when they met. When they discussed the details of their work tasks and work experience, some said more, while others shared less. But when they discussed humorous stories related to their work, everyone was very happy to participate in the discussion. For example, Hu worked in a nursing home for older people in the textile town. When the workers met up, she liked to share humorous stories about happenings in her workplace with everyone present. Besides, during the gathering, there would always be gossip about

others' work and life situations. The content of this gossip also concerned others' appearance, work, and family members. In this acquaintance-based society, even if one kept a low profile, others in the textile town were able to receive as many updates about this person as they wished.

The above description clearly shows that although the frontline workers' gathering was more relaxed and emotional than the middle-level managers' gathering, in both cases these social events were a productive way of bringing former workers together. Specifically, the similar experience and difficulties that the frontline workers have in their current work and life helped them recall the collective nostalgia of their former days in the factory. At the same time, they shared humorous experiences and expressed appreciation, which helped the former middle-level managers create a more convivial atmosphere at their gathering.

The strategies of adjustment employed by former workers come to life during their interactions and gatherings. These interactions are rooted in collective memory and a sense of nostalgia, serving as vital links to address the current economic and social disparities among them. Whether it involves delicately addressing sensitive topics or bridging emotional distances, the former workers navigate these challenges through the art of recalling the past, and the exchange of anecdotes and humorous stories. Through these practices, they find effective ways to adapt and negotiate the social and economic changes that have shaped their circumstances.

Conclusion

The strategies of adjustment represent a dynamic and adaptive process marked by resilience, compromises, and negotiations, all in response to the profound shifts brought about by social and cultural transformations. In the specific context of an industrial community, these strategies reflect the textile workers' capacity not only to adapt to these changes but also to establish equilibrium in their relationships among generations, couples, former colleagues, and friends.

In times of disruption and crisis, these strategies shed light on how the microscopic scale of daily life recalibrates our perception of generational time and official time. Societal ruptures tend to fracture the collective identity within the framework of generational time and challenge the legitimacy of official time when individuals confront life difficulties. The strategies of adjustments, however, provide a resilient force that enables workers to maintain their foothold amidst the torrents of change. They allow workers to revisit their past experiences as members of the working class, delving into the depth of generational connections and shared memories of the past. In doing so, these strategies offer a sense of continuity, empowering workers to inherit their collective heritage and shared memories in their everyday lives.

These strategies are not deliberate skills that can be replicated, but rather represent a life philosophy that has evolved over years of lived experience. This life philosophy incorporates aspects of classical Chinese Confucianism and contemporary discourses like "suzhi," yet it transcends them. It serves as an expression of the workers' individual initiative, reflecting their approach to change as a pursuit of equilibrium rather than direct confrontation.

This equilibrium arises as a result of varied interactions between generations, couples, and friends. Within these interactions, it is the inherent resilience of the working class that consistently shape and enhances these strategies of adjustment. The identity and the sense of belonging of the working class is essential to the strategies, as it structures people's memories of the past and therefore structures attitudes to the changes taking place in the present. Thus, the strategies act as a bridge to the depths of generational connections and shared memories, offering a sense of continuity amidst the social tensions of disrupted time.