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

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Citation

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

Version: Publisher's Version

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

Chapter 6

Making Industrial Heritage: Art District and Soviet-style Street

From this chapter onward, I shift my focus from descriptions of workers' everyday life to their relations and attachment to objects and place. I have previously examined what happened to workers before and after the state-owned factory closed in the earlier chapters. The lived experiences of workers enhance our understanding of the stories behind industrial heritage and their working-class legacy. In this chapter, I will delve deeply into how an industrial community has transformed and consider the contradictions that have emerged during the urban renewal process, giving rise to industrial heritage.

Unlike many studies that have discussed how to protect industrial heritage and reuse industrial resources (Alfrey and Putnam 2003; Douet 2013; Landorf 2009; Rautenberg 2012; Xie 2015), in this chapter, I will focus on how and why the heritage discourse, the reuse of industrial remnants, and the renewal of the factory community do not speak to working-class people effectively in the textile town. I present ethnographic details that demonstrate the complexity and contradictions of different actors engaged in the heritage discourse. To examine the impact of the renewal of the industrial remnants and the factory community, and to answer the question of “whose heritage?” and “whose nostalgia?” I will focus on two projects in the textile town, namely, the art district and the Soviet-style Street.

The Textile Town's Art District

The Birth of the Art District

The textile town's art district was established on the former site of the Northwest First Printing & Dyeing Factory (*Yiyin*). *Yiyin* was the first modern printing and dyeing factory designed and built by China during the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957), and it was also the largest printing and dyeing factory in Asia at that time. Nevertheless, it became the first factory in the textile town to go bankrupt in July 1997. More than 10 000 square meters of the factory plant were then unused, which provided opportunities for certain artists who were seeking lower rents, a unique historical place, and a tranquil

environment that would inspire their creative activity. This empty huge Soviet-style factory became their ideal choice.

Baiye was the first artist to stay, and then his artist friends settled down and reconstructed the unique industrial ruins. These local artists became the first eleven residents of the art district, and then some students and teachers from the Academy of Fine Arts joined them later. In early 2007, more artists moved to the district, and they gradually reworked the obsolete factory space into separate studios. In total, more than sixty artists established thirty-five open studios and art spaces (Tong 2008). In 2008, the total number of artists rose to around one hundred. The artists engaged primarily in painting but also in ceramics, sculpture, photography, installation, and performance art. The usable area expanded to 13 000 square meters over the first five years, distributed across Central Avenue and the A, B, C, and D areas, and it became the largest art district in Northwest China (Peng and Wei 2016: 363). The emergence and rise of the art district were entirely initiated by artists. The artists played an essential role in redesigning the factory building's interior and in transforming the vacant factory building surrounded by grass into a lively, creative art space. Furthermore, some curators and art organizations promoted the art district, and it became well known for hosting exhibitions for the public. Since then, the art district in the textile town has become a cultural symbol representing Xi'an's contemporary art.

The Connection Between Artists and the Industrial Past

On June 25, 2007, the first Xi'an Contemporary Art Documentary Exhibition opened in the art district. It was curated by Yue Luping, who is both an artist and curator. He made and displayed a film called *Echoes of Workers*, which presented the social problems linked to the factory's bankruptcy and workers' layoff. This work was first created in response to an invitation from a UK art exhibition. He explained the meaning of this work:

So far I have collected about 150 voices of laid-off workers. In the video, they tell their own stories. Since they use Chinese, the British audiences don't understand what they are saying. But I'm not going to translate it. The only thing I want to do is ask the British audiences to hear the abstract "voice" of the Chinese laid-off workers. Meanwhile, I have also made an "intelligible" version, which I post on my blog in the form of daily stories for Chinese audiences. In this way, these two visions form the complete work *Echoes of the Workers*.

The background music for this exhibition was a popular communist song "We Workers Have the Strength" (*wo men gongren you liliang*). A power plant in northeast China created this song in 1948. With a solid, powerful, and enthusiastic melody, the song portrays a heroic image of Chinese workers standing up to be masters in the socialist construction of the country. Over this background music, Yue Luping recorded more than one hundred workers' voices together to reproduce the historical fragments of industrial memory. This compressed the historical glory and decay of the textile town into an

exhibition that strongly recalled the everyday life of the industrial past and reinforced the attachment present between people and the industrial heritage (Peng and Wei 2016: 369).

The exhibition's purpose was to create an atmosphere in which visitors could immerse themselves and encounter the glorious working-class history. Nevertheless, it became a lament for the factory's closure and the worker layoffs. Yue Luping's exhibition showed his concern for the relationship between physical objects — the factory plant and site that bore witness to the industrial history, and people — the state-owned factory workers who had been working on this shop floor for most of their life, but who were finally abandoned by the state. Therefore, the workers' voices not only reflected their sense of pride and loss at being socialist workers but also echoed the social and cultural transformation of the industrial past and present.

Like Yue, when the art district was first established, the artists paid much attention to the relationship between art and the industrial past. They used the industrial heritage discourse to show how they were inspired by Chinese contemporary art, history, and industrial culture. This art district is based on an industrial site that had experienced borne the weight of working-class history and industrial development for half a century after the foundation of China. The artists believed that its actual value far exceeds the space's original meaning. For the artists, the art district offered them not only a physical space to work in but also a cultural space for them to pursue cultural reproduction, which combined the protection of industrial heritage with the creativity of art. It seems that they inherited the spirit of the industrial past, and then gave it a new form through redesigning the space.

From then on, when people talked about the textile town, the art district became an inevitable topic. It was presented in various tour brochures attracting visitors to this new cultural landmark. Most visitors looked round the district. They took pictures and visited artists' workshops, but only a few bought works of art from the studios and the interest they displayed did not prevent.

From the Textile Town's Art District to the Banpo International Art District

Although the artists gave this old industrial site a new lease on life, this did not mean that they could permanently settle down in the art district, which they felt was a utopia for their art creations. As the district became famous, more galleries and commercial shops arrived. These commercial activities increased the art district's value, thereby driving up property values and ultimately facilitating gentrification (on which, see Harris 2012; Zukin 1989). In China, when the local government intervenes in the management of art districts, it usually incorporates the "cultural district" into the urban plans for the "creative industry" or the "cultural industry." It then begins to renovate facilities and manage the area holistically. The logic behind the practices in the cultural industry, however, is that the state and the local government's interests are often prioritized over culture or local interests (Fung and Erni 2013). For example, Beijing's 798 District was established originally by artists, but when Beijing recognized the symbolic importance of the arts within its financial system and for its urban image, it then used the art district to promote Beijing's cultural diversity as a global city (Currier 2008).

The art district in the textile town could not escape the same fate. In 2012, the local government

cooperated with a company to invest 150 million yuan to renovate and upgrade the art district, and it changing the district's name from the textile town's art district to the Banpo International Art District. The local government initiated a set of proposals for renovating the art district. According to the plan, the original dilapidated buildings in the art district would be demolished or altered, and a new large area would be built with a high standard of greenery, water features, and sculptures. Also, a textile heritage museum would be built inside the original factory building. In addition, restaurants, bars, stores, hotels, and other service facilities would be constructed in the surrounding area so that visitors could eat, stay, play, and shop while visiting the art district. In summary, the renovation was intended to create an art park integrating historical heritage, contemporary art, cultural industries, architectural space, and leisure, as the local authorities asserted.

The proposal sounded very attractive. But it was a nightmare for the artists who had been settled in the art district for five years already. The artists did not own the art district; instead, the artists were only tenants in the art districts. When the art district was established, the artists had signed a rental contract with the factory's property management. The factory land and buildings were state-owned property, and so the artists and the owners of galleries, art institutions, and other commercial shops could only be tenants. The rising rents were their main headache. The rent in 2007 was only 6.5 yuan per square meter per month. In 2012, however, the rent rose to 12 yuan, and the utility bills increased significantly. Thus, the high rent prices forced some artists to leave the art district. Besides, the artists thought that the commercial atmosphere had distorted the original intention of being the center of Xi'an's contemporary art. Furthermore, a depression in the Xi'an art market had led to artists having difficulties surviving in the art district. Ultimately, their meager income and the increasing rents resulted in the artists leaving the art district that they had built up themselves.

Tensions and conflicts occurred during the renovation. In September 2012, the art district's "new owner" — the Jingbang Cultural Development Company — sued six artists over lease disputes. The plaintiff claimed that the six artists had refused to move out of the studio when the contract expired. The defendants — those six artists who were among the first group of artists in the art district — responded as follows:

We were the first artists who came to this place. Why did we come here? First, we wanted to build a contemporary art district. Second, we wanted to preserve the industrial heritage. The textile town's art district resembles the Beijing 798 Art District; it has historical value, and we want to preserve it. That's why we want to build a contemporary art district.

Nevertheless, the artists were unable to beat the developer who had gained support from the local government. On Christmas Day in 2011, the Fifth Retrospective Exhibition of Xi'an Contemporary Art was held at the art district. This was the artists' last opportunity to organize a contemporary exhibition. After this exhibition, the textile town's art district no longer existed and was replaced by the Banpo International Art District. Here, Banpo refers to an archaeological site containing the remains of several well-organized Neolithic settlements. This is a type of site associated with Yangshao Culture from more than 6000 years ago. Since the Banpo museum was established in 1957, it has become

one of the top ten tourist attractions in Xi'an and is rated a National First-Class Museum by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage. Banpo lies next to the textile town, and the shortest distance between Banpo museum and the art district is only one hundred meters, where there used to be a freight railway separating the two sites. The local government hoped to exploit Banpo's reputation to stimulate the art district's development. Thus, the local government and developers believed that changing its name could attract more tourists and investments.

When discussing whether the original name — The Textile Town's Art District — should be changed, the artists conducted an opinion poll. The result showed that thirty artists had taken a strong stand against changing the name, while only one artist supported it. The original name not only conveys that the art district is located in the textile town geographically, but it also demonstrates a cultural connection with the industrial past. As the art critic Tong Yujie said, "The Textile Town's Art District established on a bankrupt state-owned factory bears witness to the shift from a failing industrial park to an art park. The title conveys both the industrial history and contemporary culture in China."

The artists expressed their sense of loss, disappointment, and anger in their own ways. Baiye, the first artist who settled in the art district, exhibited his installation "Sanjia Mache (Troika)" to express the relationship between the three stakeholders: the artists, the government, and the developer. Since the interests of the three parties were different — the government wanted to develop the local economy, the property developer sought to obtain land for profit, and the artists needed a place to rent cheaply — the relationship between the three parties was essentially full of contradictions and inconsistencies. Although the artists had made an effort to preserve the art district's assets and to protect the industrial heritage from demolition, they were still members of vulnerable groups, and they could hardly fight the other two parties who possessed capital and power in an unequal relationship.

The Current Situation in the Art District

Since 2012, the government of Baqiao District and a cultural company have redesigned the art district, a process that began with the name change discussed above. They planned to invest more than 150 million yuan in retaining and transforming the main industrial zone's core area and in rebuilding and redesigning the surrounding area. The local government sought to integrate the project into "a collection of industrial heritage, contemporary art, cultural industries, architectural space, entertainment and tourism in one park, making it the largest and most comprehensive and influential cultural and artistic base in Northwest China."

I then wondered how the art district had changed over the years. I imagined that the unique change in historical circumstances, the Soviet Union-style architecture, and an environment conducive to art activities may attract more artists, cultural workers, and shops to settle there. Then, the working-class residents who lived in the textile city and young people who were fond of art could be the main visitors. To my surprise, however, I saw only the economic depression of the sparsely populated art district. Fewer people, not only tourists but also artists or shopkeepers, resided or worked in the art district.



Figure 6.1: The three textile machines placed in the art district. Photo taken by the author.

According to the signposting board there, the two sides of the main hall were separated off into an art gallery, art workshop, teahouse, coffee room, photographic studio, and various workshop classes. But when I walked along the hall, I found that some spaces were vacant and just posted advertisements on the windows for rent. In contrast, educational classes for children such as dancing and drawing were popular and many parents sat outside to wait for their children. A few art shops were open to the public, but only the shopkeepers were inside, sitting behind the desk, and staring at computer screens. When I looked at the paintings and artworks, they seemed apathetic and did not talk much to me. It was a warm winter afternoon, but I was not sure if either the weather or the factory interior made me feel cold. Everything looked lifeless and dull, except for two older people playing badminton in the middle

of the long hall. At the end of the long hall, there were three textile machines. These had belonged to the No.3 Textile Factory and had been imported from Japan in the 1980s. But these machines looked inconspicuous; only a few visitors stopped to see and take pictures when they walked by.

When I left the main hall, I saw seven large Chinese characters written in red on the wall: “ren ren dou shi yi shu jia” (Everyone is an artist). This slogan originated with the German artist Joseph Beuys. In 1973, Beuys explained his universalist approach to human creativity and the power of art to bring about social change. Interestingly, a German artist’s most famous statement was written in Chinese handwriting and in red, in a style similar to the *dazibao* (big-character posters) in the Cultural Revolution. I do not know who wrote this statement on the wall, and I am not sure whether they know the phrase’s origin. But what I did remember was that when I came here ten years ago, I saw every visitor standing by this wall, taking photos. Fewer visitors now come to the art district, and yet everyone who came here had their picture taken. Ironically, the artist who wrote this slogan left the art district in the end. Some elements of the Cultural Revolution period were visible in the art district. As Fang summarized the Beijing 798 Art District: “the tall factory buildings, industrial machinery, slogans from the Cultural Revolution, and quotations from Chairman Mao are all scenes from the Cultural Revolution and the planned economy that are burned into the minds of Chinese people” (2016: 23). Similarly, visitors to this art district, especially those who experienced the Cultural Revolution, could find a visit here evokes memories of the past, even though the slogan on the wall originally comes from the Western world and the content relates to art and artists.

Before I left the art district, an old brick house outside the main hall attracted me. It was a coffee shop. I rewarded myself with a short break, sitting inside this warm house and drinking a cappuccino. A few young people sat in this café, reading books or talking with their friends. I asked the waiter why so many art shops and galleries were closed, and he replied that it was mainly because the rising rent had made the situation practically unbearable for some artists and shopkeepers, especially after the cultural company had taken over the art district.

Zhang, who had been the shop floor director at the Printing & Dyeing Factory, now worked at the factory’s community office. Although the factory had closed, the factory’s community office still played an important role in managing all the community’s residents. He was one of the team members who had visited the Beijing 798 Art District in 2007 to learn about how a bankrupt factory could become an art district. He gave me his understanding of why the art district was not popular in the textile town:

Our textile town lacks a cultural atmosphere. Generally speaking, most residents are laid-off workers. Who would want to spend twenty yuan on a cup of coffee, or be interested in buying a painting? No one. Their educational level is not high as well; they don’t understand what art is. The textile town is not like the Qujiang district.

The Qujiang district he mentioned is a new cultural zone in Xi’an and has become a National Cultural Display Zone with a diverse range of cultural heritage, tourism, and leisure facilities. The local government has rebuilt the Qujiang district as an imagined ancient capital of China. It relies on

the location, which was once a large royal park area in the Tang dynasty, and on other famous cultural heritage sites there, such as the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda. It obtains policy support from the government and investments from developers, and it attracts increasing numbers of visitors. Zhang believed that if the textile town wished to attract young people to settle down there, it should create more job opportunities. Yet the textile town and its art district are unattractive and lack commercial value, and even young people who grew up there do not wish to stay.

The Workers' Visit to the Art District

I went to the art district several times over the year with my interlocutors who had once worked at Yiyin Factory or at other nearby textile factories. Here are a few reasons why we visited the art district together. First, walking inside the former factory space makes the working-class history come alive. It offers former workers an opportunity to describe their everyday life in the physical space when they recall their memory of previous days working in the factory. When we entered the main hall, which was once a textile shop floor, my interlocutors were excited to explain the structure of the shop floor. They pointed out the high roof and told me that the shop floor did not turn on the ceiling lamp on sunny days because the large windows allowed the natural light in. They also showed me how the textile machines worked, and they described their work tasks and everyday routines.

Second, when the former workers stood inside the building — especially when they saw just the three old, rusty, shabby textile machines and the building's transformed interior — the current situation made them feel nostalgic for the busy and lively shop floor of the previous days. The factory building's framework had not changed much, but the building's function and essence were different from before. Their memory and the new reality intertwined in that moment, and it sharpened their sentimental attachment to the place. On the one hand, the art district offered them a real and visual experience that helped them recall their memories. On the other hand, however, the combination of the present and the past could lead the former workers to feel disillusioned and alienated.

Before I invited them to visit the art district with me, most had been there just one or two times. They displayed their indifference to the art district, and emphasized that they did not understand art. They thought art was far removed from their everyday life, and they regarded art as entertainment for the middle class or for rich people. But when they stood inside the art district — especially in the main hall, which was once a shop floor — their attitudes and emotions linked to the art district changed. It is interesting to note the difference in the conversations that occurred within and outside the art district. When I talked with my interlocutors in their homes or other places, they did not stress much interest in this topic, and the conversation went like this:

Me: What do you think the factory ruins should be turned into? Do you think the art district is a good project?

A worker: I don't know. The art district is not bad; at least it is a place for entertainment.

Me: Do you think the government should preserve the factory buildings and change them into an industrial museum?

A worker: This would be good. But I think the government should pay more attention to our daily life first. Do you know the biggest landfill site is near the textile town? If the local government can solve the disgusting stink, this would be a really good thing for us.

Indeed, the divergence in views between workers and the local government emphasized the contradictions inherent in this industrial project. The residents cared about their everyday life, which was associated with their living conditions and immediate interests, while the local government paid more attention to “face projects,” such as the beautification of the textile town. Similar conversations happened all the time. When I talked about the current governmental project of rebuilding the railway theme park, a worker used the term “eye candy” (*hua er bu shi*) to complain about the project at first, and then criticized the slow progress in the construction of a roundabout on the edge of the textile town instead. He complained that the roundabout area had been under construction for at least ten years and was still incomplete. It always caused traffic jams during the rush hour, and there was damage from water pooling after torrential rain. The residents in the textile town sarcastically called it the “century project” to show that it might take a century to finish.

Nevertheless, when they walked across the shop floor they used to work on, and when they looked around the surroundings that looked familiar but different, they were eager to talk more about their past sense of security:

When you ask me whether the factory ruins should be protected, for me, it would be nice if so. I feel happy to be here because it takes me back to my youth. At that time, I did not feel the work was hard. I had good friends, and we helped each other all the time. Although we were not wealthy, everyone was happy, because our work was stable. We did not worry about sickness or children’s education. The factory provided us with real social welfare. If I was sick, I just went to the factory clinic. I didn’t even pay, our factory just deducted little fees from my salary. And more importantly, we did not worry about the children’s education. Our factory offered education from kindergarten to high school, and we just need to register when the kids reached the appropriate age. And the factory also distributed an apartment to us. Hence, what I need to do is just focus on my work.

Such nostalgia made my interlocutors very emotional. When they stood on the former shop floor, the changes in the place’s structure and functions provoked them to tell me more details about their everyday work and their ordinary life in the factory. But when I asked them whether they would like to go back to the past and still work in the factory now, most of them refused:

When I recall the previous days working on the shop floor, I also remember suffering because of the tough work: the night shift, the noise of machines, repetitive boring tasks, an unhealthy body, and limited time with family. I admire my perseverance in my youth, but if you were to ask me to work in the factory now, I couldn’t persevere with the work for more than three days. So, I don’t want to come here often because it makes me

remember the tough days I experienced. But as for the factory itself, I still think it should be preserved to remember our history and to educate the next generations.

The complex sense of pride and loss that the factory endowed them with is manifest in their transformation from the security of possessing an “iron rice bowl” (tie fan wan) job in their early years to a precarious life after being laid off. The contrast between the prosperity of the heyday when thousands of workers gathered together on the shop floors and the depression of the sparsely populated art district demonstrates the social and cultural transformation that occurred amid the historical progress.

The workers’ sense of belonging to the factory changed. In the early years of their working in the factory, all their activities — work, talk, and social interactions — happened on the shop floor. They felt that they were “masters” of the state as members of the working class. But at this moment, as visitors from “outside” visited the art district, they lost their autonomy, power, and security from the factory. When they walked inside the main hall, except for the structure of the building and the three obsolete textile machines, they could not find anything else related to the textile shop floor. The reconstruction and recreation, which turned their shop floors into an art district, alienated them because their identity as former factory workers had little to do with “art.” Therefore, the interplay between the former workers and the art district gave rise to some ruptures: a rupture created by the government and developers who have transformed factory ruins into a cultural landmark without consulting or including the former workers in the process; a rupture in the workers’ experience of their former everyday life inside the factory compared with their current work and life outside the textile town; and a rupture in the memory chain linking one generation to the next.

The Soviet-style Street

Soviet-style Buildings in the Factory Community

Everyone in the textile town is familiar with the Soviet-style apartment building. The Soviet-style buildings are villa-style residential buildings designed by Soviet experts when the first textile factory — the No.3 Factory — was built in 1953. The red roof and black brick exterior become the typical residential buildings in the textile town from the 1950s onward. Although the structure and appearance of the Soviet-style building were designed according to the blueprint provided by Soviet experts, the internal structure was not the same as the original plan. According to the original blueprint, one household occupied two to three rooms in one apartment. But when the building was used for the textile workers, it was divided into single dormitories and four workers lived in one dormitory. Or a single apartment was separated into different rooms: three families lived in one apartment and four or five people formed a household that occupied one room. The kitchen and shared bathroom were their public spaces. Despite each unit being overcrowded, the living conditions were much better than the traditional bungalows found in the textile town a half-century ago.

Nowadays, although many of the Soviet-style buildings had been demolished during the urban regeneration of the area, about fifty buildings remained within the factory community. In the No.3

Factory community, the Soviet-style buildings had two stories in line with the original blueprint designed by Soviet experts, while they had three stories in the other factory communities. About twenty households lived on each story of the Soviet-style building. New residential buildings have been constructed in the factory community since the 1990s, and so these Soviet-style buildings gradually fell into disrepair. The black bricks on their exterior started to crumble, and the red roof leaked when it rained. Some window frames were broken, and so it was hard to protect the residents from the wind and rain. Inside the building, the dim hallway was devoid of sunlight all year round. The wall paint peeled off, and damp air mixed with the smell of urine and a musty smell. The aging heating, water supply, and drainage systems made the conditions there very poor.



Figure 6.2: The original Soviet-style buildings. Photo taken by the author.

The residents who now lived in the Soviet-style buildings could be divided up into three categories: older textile workers, tenants from outside the textile town, and local institutions. The Soviet-style buildings have witnessed three generations of factory community members moving in and out. From the 1980s, the factory built new residential apartments for the workers. Then, most of the workers moved to other apartments, but because some workers had insufficient money to purchase new apartments, they continued to live in the Soviet-style buildings. Several decades passed, and as these workers became older, their children grew up and moved away from them. Besides the older workers, people from outside the textile town became the main tenants. They came from other places and worked in the textile town. Some were self-employed entrepreneurs operating small businesses. Although the

living conditions were poor, the rent was cheaper than in other buildings in the textile town. Thus, besides renting an apartment to live in, some rooms were used as warehouses.

In addition, some Soviet-style buildings were commandeered as sites for administrative institutions, such as the neighborhood committee (ju wei hui), the subdistrict office (jie dao ban), the factory clinic, or various training classes. The neighborhood committee (ju wei hui) in the No.3 Factory community, for example, is responsible for the administration of residents who live in this xiaoqu. It is a smaller administrative division open to its residents, and is therefore an agency that is part of the local government. Thus, to protect the “face” of the local government, despite the building’s exterior appearance not changing too much, the inner conditions were much better than in the other, residential Soviet-style buildings. The wall was painted white, and slogans like “core socialist values” (hexin shehuizhuyi jiazhiguan) and “harmonious community” (hexie shehui) were placed on it. These showed the public the latest state policies. Besides the slogans, a display board exhibited some activities and events that the neighborhood committee organized.

Making a Soviet-style Street

In 2017, the local government planned to make a Soviet-style Street, which was based on reconstructing the Soviet-style buildings. Although several rows of Soviet-style buildings lay in the No.3 Factory community, only eight buildings along the street were chosen for this project. The local government’s planning documents were ambitious:

The Soviet-style street project will be located on both sides of the Fangsan road, with a planned investment of about 200 million yuan and a total construction and renovation area of about 29 000 square meters. There will be a commercial area integrating special heritage sites, a museum, and other leisure businesses. The main construction will be completed before June 30 and with a trial operation no later than September 30.

The residents felt excited. One reason was that the Soviet-style Street was located within the factory neighborhoods, and it would thus be very convenient for residents to visit. This was especially the case for the residents of the No.3 factory community, who could walk along the street as soon as they reached the community’s gate. The plan to construct a Soviet-style Street became much hoped for. According to the plan, the Soviet-style Street would not only be a commercial and entertainment site but would also have several public sites like a museum and bookstores. The residents thought it could be an opportunity to promote the old industrial community’s renovation.

According to the official plan, the function of the Soviet-style Street was to be a cultural and commercial site that would help to enrich the residents’ cultural lives. In the beginning, the local government signed a contract with Xinhua bookstore — the largest and only country-wide bookstore chain in China. According to the contract, 4600 square meters of buildings were to be used as a bookstore. Besides the logo “xinhua shudian” in Mandarin and the word “bookstore” in capital letters at the top of the building, a cuboid was also erected in front of the building. Each face of the cuboid

had about twenty-five titles of world-famous books engraved on it, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Les Misérables*. There were about one hundred book titles and authors on the four sides in total.

The residents were glad that the textile town would finally have its own bookstore. I always heard residents complaining that the textile town lacked a cultural atmosphere. Almost one hundred thousand residents lived in the textile town, but there was only one small bookstore located near the No.5 Factory. Although most workers did not read books regularly, they still believed that more bookstores were necessary, in particular for the young generations. Thus, everyone was looking forward to the bookstore in the new Soviet-style street.

Nevertheless, the reality differed from their expectations. More than three years passed, and the project was not completed and opened on schedule. The most disappointing thing was that the bookstore could not be opened because the Xinhua Bookstore Company had terminated its collaboration with the textile town's local government. No one knew the real reason, but there was constant gossiping about the useless local officials.

The residents passed by the construction site each day. They witnessed how the buildings' interior was completely demolished, leaving only the exterior frame. The project was finally completed in 2020. Upon completion, the new facade resembled the original, but one part of the building has been covered with a transparent glass shell and a glass corridor linked the buildings in the middle. The internal structure of these buildings had also been changed: it was no longer used for apartments and small residential rooms, but as a separate space for business tenants.

According to the local government's (2018) planning document, they made the Soviet-style Street in order to "build a specially themed commercial area integrating special business, leisure dining, a museum, and a display in the old building's style." In 2020, the local government announced what they called Project Investment Proposal. The introduction was similar to the 2018 plan; it even showcased more encouraging content related to the textile town's features:

The project fully explores and demonstrates the unique historical and cultural features of the development of the new Chinese textile industry. It makes good use of the Soviet-style buildings that have left us with an indelible mark of a bygone era, to integrate and utilize the historical, cultural, and special architectural resources of the old industrial area in the textile town. It will develop a special cultural demonstration and a tourism theme; it will integrate itself with and develop alongside the art district, the Sanmian International Creative Culture Block, the Double Creation Base and the Railway Theme Park, to build a new landmark as part of a cultural and creative district in Xi'an city.

Nevertheless, when the target of the 2020s Project Investment Proposal was mentioned, its practical implementation had apparently changed:

At present, the project has been completed, and the investment area is about 2190 square meters. It intends to recruit branded coffee shops, Chinese and Western restaurants, light



Figure 6.3: The reconstructed Soviet-style buildings. Photo taken by the author.

meals, wine and light food, a family restaurant, a hairdressing salon, a fragrance and flower art shop, baking and simple food shops, a handicraft workshop and other related business, and the mode of cooperation is an overall operation or commercial lease.

The above inconsistency demonstrates a shift from a cultural preservation blueprint to a commercial and entertainment practice. The blueprint showed that the Soviet-style Street would play an important role in protecting cultural heritage and promoting economic development. This investment proposal, however, left only the commercial elements without any cultural content. Ironically, the real situation

was even worse than the expectations described in the 2020s investment proposal. In the proposal, the targeted merchants involved mainly middle-class entertainment and consumption, such as Western restaurants, light meals, wine bars, and salons. But in 2021, the merchants that finally moved into the Soviet street were only two small grocery shops, traditional local restaurants, a cell phone store, and a children's extra-curricular class, and there was still a large vacant area.

The residents were not satisfied with the Soviet-style buildings. First, from the building's appearance, they felt that the glass framework and the glass corridor were highly unusual because they were not like the original buildings, and so they lost the spirit of the Soviet-style building. Second, they felt very disappointed that there was no museum as originally planned. They thought their past experience working in the factory should be memorialized because they believed that the development of state-owned enterprises in China was a history of working-class people who had devoted most of their life to the socialist construction. They blamed the local government for ignoring their past experiences working at the factory and for only focusing on the economic benefits. Third, they felt that the textile town lacked a cultural atmosphere, and that the younger generation should live in a place with cultural elements. In the original plan, the local government had promised to build a very large bookstore, but the final version only included highly commercial elements. The original intention was for the Soviet-style street to promote the community's cultural and economic development; the current situation, however, evinced a compromise with their economic needs. Thus, the Soviet-style street lost the historical working-class spirit it had in the past. Instead, it consisted of Soviet-style architecture filled with a commercial atmosphere rather similar to other commercial districts.

Three Sculptures

In addition to the Soviet-style buildings, there were three iron sculptures placed along the Soviet street. The first one was of a Soviet expert. He was a textile expert named Sibiriyakov who came from the Soviet Union in the 1950s. He offered his professional skills and helped to solve many problems during the construction of the first textile factory in 1953 in the textile town. The sculpture showed a tall, Western-looking man in a suit, holding a blueprint in his hand. Behind him, the sculpture's background depicted the factory building's saw-tooth roof and a crane towering behind it.

The other two sculptures were two female textile workers — Li Fengqin and Hou Xiumin — who were both model workers. They were from the first batch of textile workers in the textile town, and they had been working in the factory since the factory was established in 1953. The two sculptures depicted these two model workers at work. They were dressed in the typical female textile workers' workwear — aprons and white caps — and were working at a textile machine. Hou Xiumin had one hand on the loom while smiling slightly, and her head was gently bowed as if she were thinking. The top half of the loom depicted the heald frames in weaving process. The middle was a gray fabric that had been rolled up by the weaver's beam, and the bottom half depicted the loom's body. Li Fengqin, another textile worker, had her head slightly tilted. She was grinning, with one arm holding a yarn bobbin above her head. Behind her were various yarns. The action this figure showed was a little



Figure 6.4: Sculpture 1: A Soviet textile expert. Photo taken by the author.



Figure 6.5: Sculptures 2 and 3: Two model workers. Photo taken by the author.

exaggerated because it was not an everyday action completed as part of her job.

The three sculptures represent the industrial history in the textile town: the Soviet expert represents the history of Soviet support and help for the new country's industrial construction during the 1950s, while the other two sculptures represent exemplary workers, that is, ideal socialist workers during the industrialization process. The three sculptures were built to showcase significant figures in the textile town's glorious history. The Soviet expert shows that the textile town's construction was grounded in the top standards of that time. Also, the Soviet expert is a response to the Soviet-style street concept,

as it emphasizes the Soviet element. The other two sculptures of model workers show that the labor of workers in the textile town has been recognized and honored at the national level. They represent not only individual achievements, but also collective memory and a sense of pride in being textile workers in a socialist factory.

The residents, who were former workers living in the factory community, walked by the sculptures every day. Their attitudes to the sculpture were different from official expectations. First, they could not relate emotionally to the Soviet expert. They wondered why they had to commemorate this man rather than certain Chinese experts and workers. They admitted the help and support received from Soviet experts, but this figure was far removed from their work and life, both spatially and temporally. On the contrary, they believed that other Chinese experts and the first generation of workers were real heroes and should be remembered and commemorated.

The sculptures of the other two model workers provoked complex feelings in them too. On the one hand, the sculptures struck a chord with the textile town's oldest residents, who were among the first generation of textile workers. When they passed by the sculpture, a sense of pride made them eager to share stories with me about what they had learned from the model workers, and how they were proud of working with these national-level model workers. On the other hand, for the second generation, who had experienced both the glorious past and the decline and closure of the factory, the model workers' sculptures gave them a sense of loss. When they finished reading the introductions to the sculptures, they made comments like, "Don't you think it's useless? Even if the past was good, look at the present!" Indeed, despite all these sculptures representing the glorious history of the textile town, no sculpture could represent other textile workers' real experiences — especially their difficult life after being laid off.

“Bureaucratic Nostalgia” and “Social Nostalgia”

The Soviet-style street shows the contradictory perspectives present among the residents and the local government officials. The local government's approach to reviving the textile town involves using heritage discourse to attract investments and improve the local economic development. In their original blueprint, they claimed the industrial heritage's significance and made designs that integrated the industrial heritage with other cultural elements. They reconstructed the Soviet-style buildings, and despite the inner structure changing, the buildings' exterior remained the same as before. In the local officials' logic, heritage is a constructed entity. They believed that if they did not reconstruct the Soviet-style buildings, these buildings would inevitably be ignored, abandoned, and would ultimately disappear from people's memory. A similar logic was at play with the sculptures. They thought the Soviet experts and two model workers were the most important representative examples of the textile town's glorious history, and so these examples would help to evoke working-class people's collective memory and a sense of belonging.

The government's logic is similar to Herzfeld's concept of “bureaucratic nostalgia.” Herzfeld (2021) illustrated how the official state seeks to erase all traces of the old lifestyle, replacing them with

a sanitized version that those whose lifestyle is affected would not even recognize as their own. Based on findings from one of his main field sites — Pom Mahakan in Bangkok — Herzfeld criticized the political logic of eviction during urbanization, and gave a further explanation:

Bureaucratic nostalgia is a forced eviction from the present, which evacuates the community from historical time just as the authorities have banished it from space ... The bureaucrats' nostalgia is a weapon of structural violence; they use the mockery of those monumentalizing little notices about vanished streets to exorcise any trace of the lived reality and to deny it any hope of return. (2021: 154)

The construction of the Soviet-style Street showed how bureaucratic nostalgia was performed in the textile town. The Soviet-style buildings had been established for more than half a century, and they had witnessed the rise and fall of the textile town. But when the new apartment buildings had been built, the Soviet-style buildings were demolished one by one, and they finally faded out of historical consciousness. Although several buildings still existed, the residents lived in very poor conditions. Some residents were older working-class people who were among the first factory generation, while some were members of the second generation who had experienced being laid off. For many reasons, they did not have the opportunity to move to other apartments with better living conditions. These people had also been abandoned along with the Soviet buildings. In recent years, the state had begun to focus on protecting industrial heritage, and then local governments responded to these calls. In the textile town, to make a Soviet-style street, the local officials evicted the residents who had originally lived in the Soviet buildings, and they then changed the inner structure and reconstructed the buildings as part of plans for the street's economic development. The local government thought the street might attract visitors from outside the textile town who wished to see how unique the Soviet-style buildings are. But in fact, there were very few visitors to the textile town, let alone to this Soviet-style Street.

Besides the chosen buildings, there were forty other Soviet-style buildings in the factory community. For instance, there was another row of Soviet-style buildings behind the Soviet-style Street, and many textile workers still lived there. The Soviet-style Street and the original Soviet-style building were only twenty meters apart, but the government made a boundary with an iron fence separating them. The residents living in the community could not enter the Soviet-style street from the inside; only after they exited through the community's gate could they walk to the Soviet Street. The residents complained and said, "Same buildings, different treatment." Indeed, the area around the Soviet-style Street was tidy. It was decorated with flowerbeds, and the ground was covered with black stones. Another row of Soviet-style buildings next to the Soviet-style Street, however, was dilapidated. The road was dirty, and there were always puddles there when it rained.

The iron fence became a boundary that cut the connection between the working-class people and the industrial heritage, and also separated out two kinds of nostalgia: bureaucratic nostalgia and social nostalgia. Bureaucratic nostalgia is neither an innocent nor a romantic sentiment. Rather, the official government asks people to remember the beautiful aspects and forget the painful past, thereby building a positive image that draws people into a fixed, singular, and selective version of history. In reality,

bureaucratic nostalgia is a strategic tool used by the state to disguise its destructive actions. Faced with the economic decline of the textile town, local officials proposed plans to revive it by evoking memories of its socialist heyday. They highlighted elements such as the Soviet-style buildings, the contributions of Soviet experts, and the model workers, all of which symbolized the town's critical role in socialist construction. Yet, this nostalgic narrative is a veneer for their actual actions: evicting long-term residents from the Soviet-style buildings, concealing the precarious realities faced by laid-off workers, and transforming the community into commercialized spaces.

But for the working-class residents, the construction of the Soviet-style street evoked what I refer to as "social nostalgia." Social nostalgia is rooted in social memory (Connerton 1989). For the residents, social memory represents their collective past and the enduring memory of living within Soviet-style buildings. When the excavators hit the brick walls, leaving a pile of bricks and tiles and broken doors and windows on the ground, it evoked their social nostalgia of their everyday life in the Soviet-style buildings. These old Soviet-style buildings not only witnessed the rise and fall of the textile factory but also gathered the hearts and souls of several generations of textile workers and their pursuit of life. The memories that the working-class residents recalled were not of the building facades or of the model workers in the factory. Instead, what they felt nostalgia was their everyday life in those buildings, how family members lived together, how they got along with their neighbors and shared the public space. For example, a female textile worker shared her memories:

In the past, living here was quite lively. At first, all the people who lived here were single workers, so the building was used as dormitories for single people. When everyone got married, it was used for small apartments for couples. And then when they had children, the family atmosphere became stronger. We shared the public space, water room, and toilet. We all cooked in the corridor and shared delicious food all the time.

In addition to this positive nostalgia, however, they also recalled dealing with poor conditions that evoked a sense of bitter nostalgia. One older textile worker described the situation as follows:

Four family members lived in an apartment: my parents, my sister, and I lived together in one room. The biggest inconvenience of living in an old Soviet-style building was that several families shared the toilet, and because of the irregular water supply and water interruptions, the toilet often either flooded or overflowed with feces. Besides, as there was no heating pipe in winter, we had to find our own way to heat our home, either by making a stove or buying an electric heater. Our using a stove for fear of gas poisoning, and using an electric heater, often caused the plug to trip because of the aging wiring, and so everything needed to be done extra carefully.

The residents who still lived in the Soviet-style buildings strongly felt that the Soviet-style Street was a "face project," like other projects in the textile town. They complained that if the local officials wanted to strengthen solidarity, then they should pay attention to the living conditions and renovate the old buildings. When I went upstairs to visit an interlocutor's mother who had lived in the building for

almost half a century, I noticed that the living conditions were very poor: there were broken windows, rotten wooden doors, dilapidated staircases, rusty faucets above the public sinks, and peeling, grimy walls. These buildings, which looked like they had been forgotten for a long time, were now extremely dilapidated.

Sad news about an old Soviet-style building aroused people's wider concern. In May 2020, a fire broke out in a building in the Yiyin Factory community. The building on fire had been built in the 1950s. It was three stories high with a wooden roof. After the fire started in a room on the third floor, it spread rapidly, with over 700 square meters on fire, engulfing more than thirty households. Unfortunately, two older people were unable to escape and eventually died. This caused great sadness for the residents who lived, or had lived, in the Soviet-style building. It evoked feelings of mourning, resentment, anger, and also a longing for the past — for a time when everyone had felt a sense of security and happiness when living in the Soviet-style buildings.

Therefore, social nostalgia is a dynamic process that changes along with social transformations. It is an emotional need based on social memory. Social nostalgia partly originates from the everyday life of the past, while another part is a reproduction of memories based on the ever-changing life. This nostalgia is not simply collective nostalgia, nor is it a complete rejection of bureaucratic nostalgia. It partly share the positive aspects of bureaucratic nostalgia, but more importantly, it is a reflective collective emotion that reflects on the changes between past collective life and the experiences of the present.

Whose Heritage and Whose Nostalgia?

In this chapter, I have introduced two industrial heritage projects conducted in the textile town to reveal why the industrial heritage does not speak to working-class residents effectively. The first project was an art district launched by artists but then taken over by the local government and investors. For artists, the industrial space offered them a space in which they could pursue cultural reproduction. They felt empathy toward the factory ruins, and they were eager to breathe new life into the factory site. The artists connected the special value of the industrial ruins with their artistic creativity. They showed how the spirit of the industrial past could become present again in their works of art. They evoked the public's longing for the industrial past by reconstructing the inner space of the shop floor, and they drew connections between their works of art and the industrial past, and advocated their mission to protect the industrial heritage. Nevertheless, cruel reality impinged on the artist's utopian space. Rent became the trickiest problem, and then most of the artists were evicted and other cultural businesses settled in. In the end, the "art district" existed in name only, and its real value eroded dramatically.

The second project was a Soviet-style street in the textile town, which was based on the reconstruction of the seventy-year-old Soviet buildings. The project retained the buildings' appearance but changed the interior and transformed the original function of accommodation to a cultural street focused on entertainment and consumption. Meanwhile, three sculptures — a Soviet expert and two female model workers — were placed near the Soviet-style buildings and became another essential

element of the Soviet-style street.

Both cases elaborate how the heritage discourse was used by different actors during the reconstruction and regeneration of the industrial ruins. For the local government, protecting and developing “industrial heritage” in the textile town was their main urban regeneration policy. On the surface, the art district and Soviet-style street projects were intended to protect the industrial ruins and show the public the importance of these industrial sites and their history. In reality, however, economic interests and development were a crucial consideration, as the textile town had fallen behind in urban development compared with other new and competitive districts. Thus, the government mainly focused on using the physical place and the “art” or “Soviet” labels to attract investment, while failing to consider the essential question: what is industrial heritage? The local government excluded the artists who founded the artist district, and they ignored the working-class people who were once masters of the socialist factory. Ultimately, heritage had become a source of legitimacy for the local government when pursuing urbanization projects.

The artists founded the art district. They believed they were the masters of this cultural site. But they were later abandoned and evicted. Their use of “heritage discourse” accompanied the art district’s development. When the art district was initially established, the lower rent, the unique historical site, and the tranquil environment offered them an art utopia that they constructed themselves. The artists used “industrial heritage” to give meaning to these industrial ruins. In turn, this became a form of cultural capital for their art creation, thus attracting visitors to this cultural landmark. When they lost out to gentrification, they also used a heritage discourse to defend their rights. They claimed that they were protecting industrial heritage through artistic ways, and that they therefore had a right to stay. Thus, “heritage” became a weapon for artists to defend themselves against external, more powerful subjects.

For workers, the meaning of industrial heritage became more complex when they used heritage discourse. In the case of the art district, when they visited the place in which they worked, they felt both alienation and familiarity. In terms of a sense of alienation, they felt a distance between their own experience and their understanding of art. The reconstruction that changed the structure and interior design of the previous shop floor alienated them because their identity as former factory workers was far from “art.” Nevertheless, this physical place was familiar to them. When they stood inside the art district, their memories of working routines and of the people with whom they worked emerged immediately. In that moment, they were no longer strangers to the art district; rather, they were the masters of this place long before the artists settled down there.

The ignoring of workers’ voices and the neglect of the working-class people’s everyday life connected to the industrial heritage is the deep reason why workers do not recognize the art district and Soviet-style street as industrial heritage that bears their memory, experience, and nostalgia. When the government and developers reconstructed the art district and made a Soviet-style street, the meaning of the industrial heritage changed. The workers felt disappointed in the art district because it lacked tangible objects related to the industrial remnants: except for the three old machines and the remaining shop floor interior, nothing else can be seen as “heritage.” They felt disappointed in the Soviet-style

Street too; after all, except for the building's similar appearance, the essential Soviet-style elements were no longer present. And the local government even built a boundary that cut the connection between the real Soviet buildings and the Soviet-style Street.

In addition, both cases demonstrate different layers of nostalgia. The artists in the art district had a romantic nostalgia, and their longing for the past came from a specific imagining of the socialist legacy. This offered them meaning in their mission to preserve the industrial heritage and reconstruct the factory plant as a utopian space. For the workers who visit the art district, however, there is no simple nostalgia; they do not want to go back to the past and experience it romantically like middle-class “urban explorers” (High and Lewis 2007); rather, it is a place that brings forth in them a sense of both pride and loss. They remember the feeling of security and the dignity in being a textile worker, but the sense of loss makes them reluctant to return to the past because of the associated mental and physical trauma. This is similar to the social nostalgia when workers saw how the Soviet-style Street had been made. The social nostalgia relates to something really painful for people, but what the official state does is generally conceal the painful side; it only depicts the beautiful surfaces and evokes a nostalgic imagination. Thus, the construction of the Soviet-style street reveals how bureaucratic nostalgia has covered up the poor condition of other old Soviet-style buildings and the precarious situation of the workers who still live in the Soviet-style buildings.

Conclusion

Despite the reuse and reconstruction of industrial heritage sites becoming a form of urban renewal, the exclusion of working-class people in this process resulted in conflict between the authorities and residents. The cases of the artist district and the Soviet-style Street reveal how heritage politics lies behind “urban renewal.” Indeed, as Smith (1996) analyzed, the term “urban renewal” is often a euphemism for the brutality of gentrification. The irony is that although workers admitted the inclusion of the art district and the Soviet-style Street as industrial heritage in official and public discourses, both sites built boundaries that alienated and ignored the workers who were the main actors in creating industrial history.

Industrial heritage and nostalgia extend beyond the confines of the working class. Through interaction with other groups and the collective experience of heritage, the notion of industrial heritage has been broadened. In this chapter, I have examined two examples of industrial heritage reproduction that cannot be deemed failures yet are not entirely successful, generating numerous contradictions. Amidst these conflicts, debates over whose heritage and nostalgia, coupled with governmental initiatives for urban renewal in aging industrial areas, have become increasingly intricate. Moreover, these cases illuminate distinct layers of nostalgia — bureaucratic nostalgia and social nostalgia — providing profound insights into the social and cultural dynamics underpinning heritage. In the forthcoming chapter, I will delve deeper into how collective and individual memory within such nostalgia serves as an effective means of understanding the significance of industrial heritage for the working class.