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

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Appendix B

Summary

This dissertation examines the relationship between industrial heritage and the working class in Fangzhi Cheng, a textile town located in the eastern suburbs of Xi'an, China. Drawing on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, it traces the lives of three generations of textile workers who built, labored in, and ultimately endured the closure of six state-owned textile factories during China's socialist and post-socialist transformations. Through the lens of nostalgia, this study develops a more precise and critical understanding of the relationship between class and heritage, asking whether and how industrial heritage can genuinely speak to the working-class people it claims to represent.

The textile town was constructed during China's First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) as part of a broader national project of socialist industrialization. The factories were organized around the *danwei* — the work unit system — which provided workers not only with employment but with housing, medical care, education, and a dense social world. Workers from across China settled in the textile town, forging a community defined by shared labor, collective identity, and a strong sense of dignity as socialist workers. This dissertation traces that history from its constructive origins through the economic reforms of the 1990s, which brought mass layoffs, factory bankruptcies, and the dismantling of the *danwei* system. By the late 2000s, all five major factories in the textile town had closed, leaving behind a community of former workers who continued to reside in the same residential area, separated from their former workplaces by what this study describes as an invisible but deeply felt boundary.

The central theoretical contribution of this dissertation lies in its use of nostalgia as an analytical framework for understanding the relationship between class identity and heritage politics. Nostalgia, understood here not as a sentimental longing for a better past, but as a complex and contradictory social force, reveals the tensions between official heritage narratives and the lived experiences of working-class people. This study distinguishes between “bureaucratic nostalgia” — the state's selective and sanitized presentation of the industrial past — and “social nostalgia,” which encompasses the collective and multilayered yearnings of workers across generations. While the state deploys nostalgia to attract middle-class consumption and tourism through heritage projects such as art districts and Soviet-style streets, former workers experience nostalgia as something altogether more painful, contradictory, and generative. They are simultaneously proud of their socialist past and resentful of their abandonment by

the state; they long for a home that has been transformed beyond recognition, yet continue to inhabit and shape it.

This dissertation argues that industrial heritage and working-class heritage cannot and should not be separated. It addresses a fundamental question raised in the field: “How can it be called industrial heritage if there is no working class here?” It aims to understand how workers navigate the profound ruptures between their past industrial lives and their current engagement with heritage, examining whether the concept remains useful for exploring class identities in a nominally socialist state. Official heritage policy in China prioritizes the aesthetic and economic value of industrial spaces while systematically excluding the voices, memories, and needs of the working-class communities who created them. Heritage politics, in this context, functions as a form of neoliberal urban governance that reproduces class-based inequality under the guise of cultural preservation. The former textile workers of Fangzhi Cheng are not passive victims of this process, however. They resist through memory, through the everyday transmission of working-class habitus, and through the persistent maintenance of *guanxi* as a living and embodied form of industrial heritage.

A major contribution of this study is its expansion of the definition of industrial heritage beyond physical artifacts and machinery. This dissertation argues that heritage is embodied and inherited by workers in their everyday lives through traits cultivated during the socialist era. This is manifested through habitus — the persistence of specific characteristics such as punctuality, a strong work ethic, and a sense of responsibility, which workers carry into their new, often precarious, workplaces. Additionally, the strategic use of *guanxi* — social networks and reciprocity formed within the factory community — is presented as a unique form of intimate, affective heritage. Together, habitus and *guanxi* reveal that industrial heritage is not confined to factory buildings and machines; it is embodied, practiced, and transmitted through the daily lives of working-class people across generations.

This dissertation ultimately argues that class still matters. As China’s rapid urbanization and economic transformation continue to reshape old industrial communities, the experiences of former socialist workers risk being absorbed into a heritage discourse that celebrates the industrial past while erasing the people who lived it. By centering the voices, memories, and strategies of three generations of textile workers in Fangzhi Cheng, this study calls for a more inclusive and critical approach to industrial heritage — one that recognizes working-class communities not as objects of heritage conservation, but as their most essential and living carriers.