

The Gendered Landscape of Chinese Forestry Reform:
Labor, Narrative and Resistance, 1950s–Current

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Abstract

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In contrast to much work on gender and development in the Global South, which has emphasized the influence of Global North-oriented capitalism, my research demonstrates that the gendering of labor and identities as well as the collective mobilization of subalterns in southern China are the outcomes of the articulation of *both* former socialist development projects *and* current neoliberal discourse. Gender, in my dissertation, is a necessary category of analysis to understand the workings of state power, technologies of governance, and subaltern oppositions. A gendered approach makes evident the ways in which former workers personalize and skillfully utilize discursive logics from different historical junctures to protest the current conditions of their lives. Grounded in gender studies, anthropology, and critical development studies, my project is also in dialogue with environmental studies, geography, political science, and studies

of law and society.

My dissertation is a historical and ethnographic examination of workers' lives and labor amidst the reforms of the forestry industry in China since the 1950s. The dissertation demonstrates how, through the use of development projects, the Chinese state institutionalized the gendering of labor and social welfare. It also shows, however, that the forestry workers were able to re-purpose this same gendered institutionalization in order to create space for their own political voices. My work, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a mountainous area of Fujian Province in southern China between 2008 and 2015, illustrates gendered difference in the treatment of workers in the realm of labor divisions, state pensions and legal institutions as well as workers' subsequent effective cultivation of a gendered legal consciousness to contest economic injustices from decades earlier. I use discursive analysis of state documents, oral histories with multiple generations of workers, and ethnographic attention to still-unfolding protests in order to make sense of these dynamics.

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Figures	iv
Glossary	xii
Introduction	1
Chapter I: Gendering of Forestry Labor in Northern Fujian, 1950s-2010s	25
Chapter II: Forestry Danwei in Transition: Contesting Space and Invisible Bodies	71
Chapter III: Speaking Bitterness as Resistance: The Gendered Narrative Performance of Elderly Forestry Workers	109
Chapter IV: Coming into Differential Consciousness: The Collective Struggle of Lumber Mill Women Workers Fifteen Years after Layoff	144
Epilogue	185
References	192

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To conduct this interdisciplinary project, I am fortunate for diverse sources of financial

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Aspiring to speak to international audiences, my dissertation took me on several trips across the ocean: the University of Michigan-Fudan Dissertation Workshop on Gender Studies in Shanghai, China, Women and Gender in Chinese Studies Network (WAGnet) Symposium in Edinburgh, Scotland, Engendering Social Transformation in China Symposium in Victoria, Canada, and the North American Asian Feminist Collective at the National Women's Studies Association annual conferences. The fellow attendees became the readers of my dissertation, the collaborators on panels and a book project, and the comrades on my journey through intellectual and emotional struggle.

Writing a dissertation is a very lonely journey. Despite all the joys of building connections through shared research interests and heated debates, one still needs to figure out how she wants to be heard and to articulate her own thoughts in her own way. One's writing is intertwined with her personal life and political commitment. Therefore I would like to thank my

friends who accompanied me on this journey, to name a few: alma khasawnih, Jey Saung, Xin Huang, Shana Ye, Gladys Jian, Hsiao-wen Cheng, and my PARISOL community. Together we rolled our eyes at micro-aggressions experienced in the classroom or on the street. Together we deromanticized academia and scholarly labor. Together we navigated the scarcities of time and resources in graduate school. Together we continue redefining “family” and “home” in a place where people always see us as foreign. A special thank you goes to Aaron Hartwell, my partner and good friend, who always cooked good food, watered the plants and vegetables, and fed the cat, putting his caring labor to make sure all the living things in the house survive and thrive, including our baby.

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Figures

Figure 1. “Aid The Mountainous Area Construction” Migration Program, 1958-1965



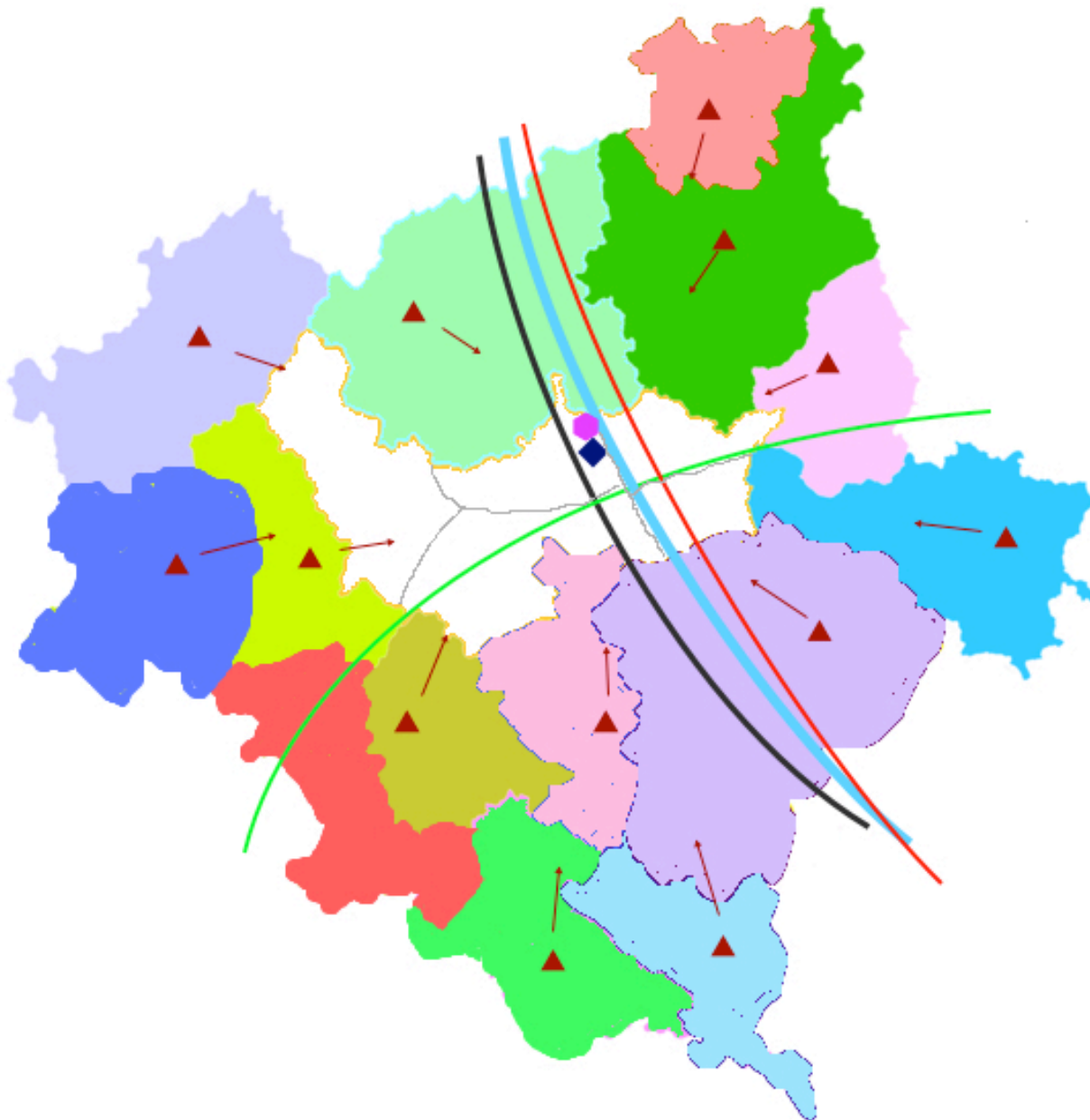
Figure 2. The Location of Shunwen County



Dotted lines: railways

Green triangles: Wuyi Mountains

Figure 3. The Proximity between Shunwen Lumber Mill and Surrounding Logging Camps



White space in the center: a grouping of five urban street offices

Colored areas: fourteen rural townships.

Red triangles: state logging camps

Pink hexagon: Transportation and Auto Repair Shop

Blue square: Shunwen Lumber Mill

Light blue line: Tunfu River

Black line: interprovincial railway

Red and green lines: two public roads.

Figure 4. Diagram of State Forestry in Shunwen

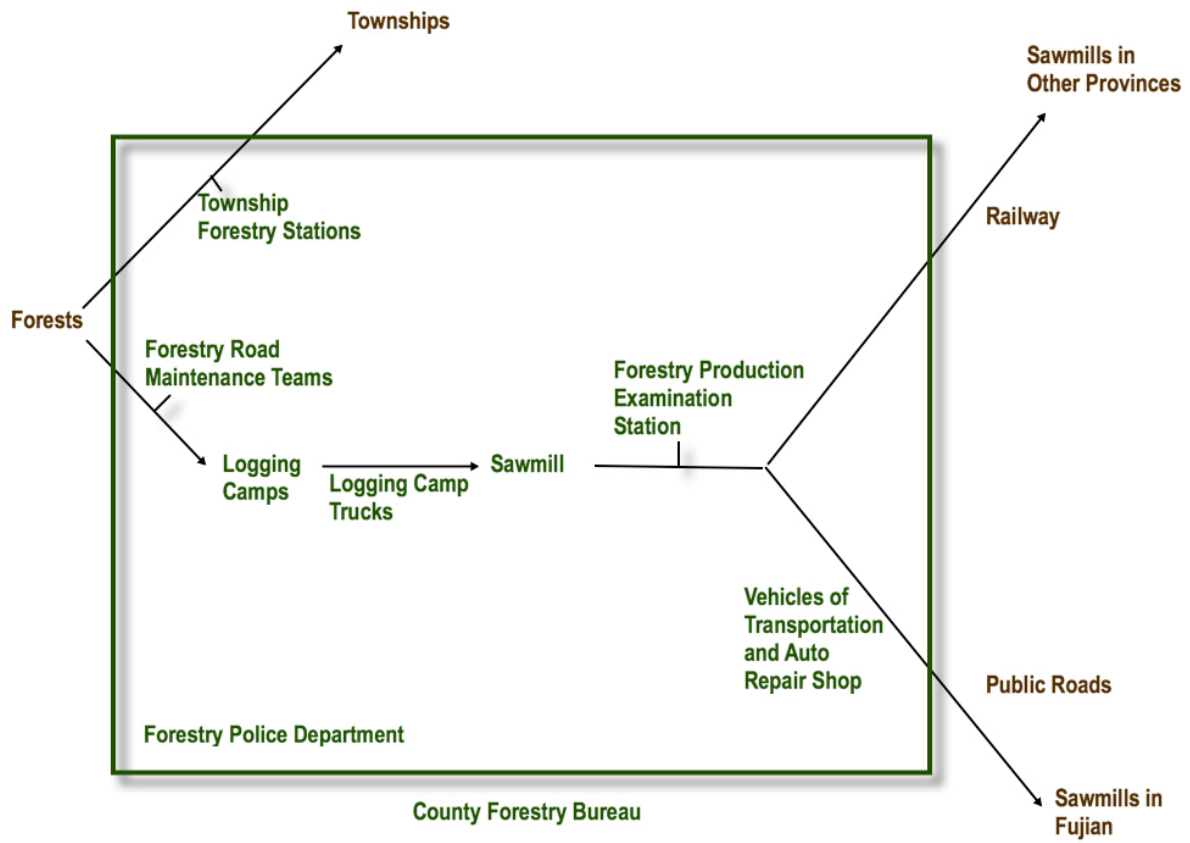


Figure 5. The Shunwen Lumber Mill

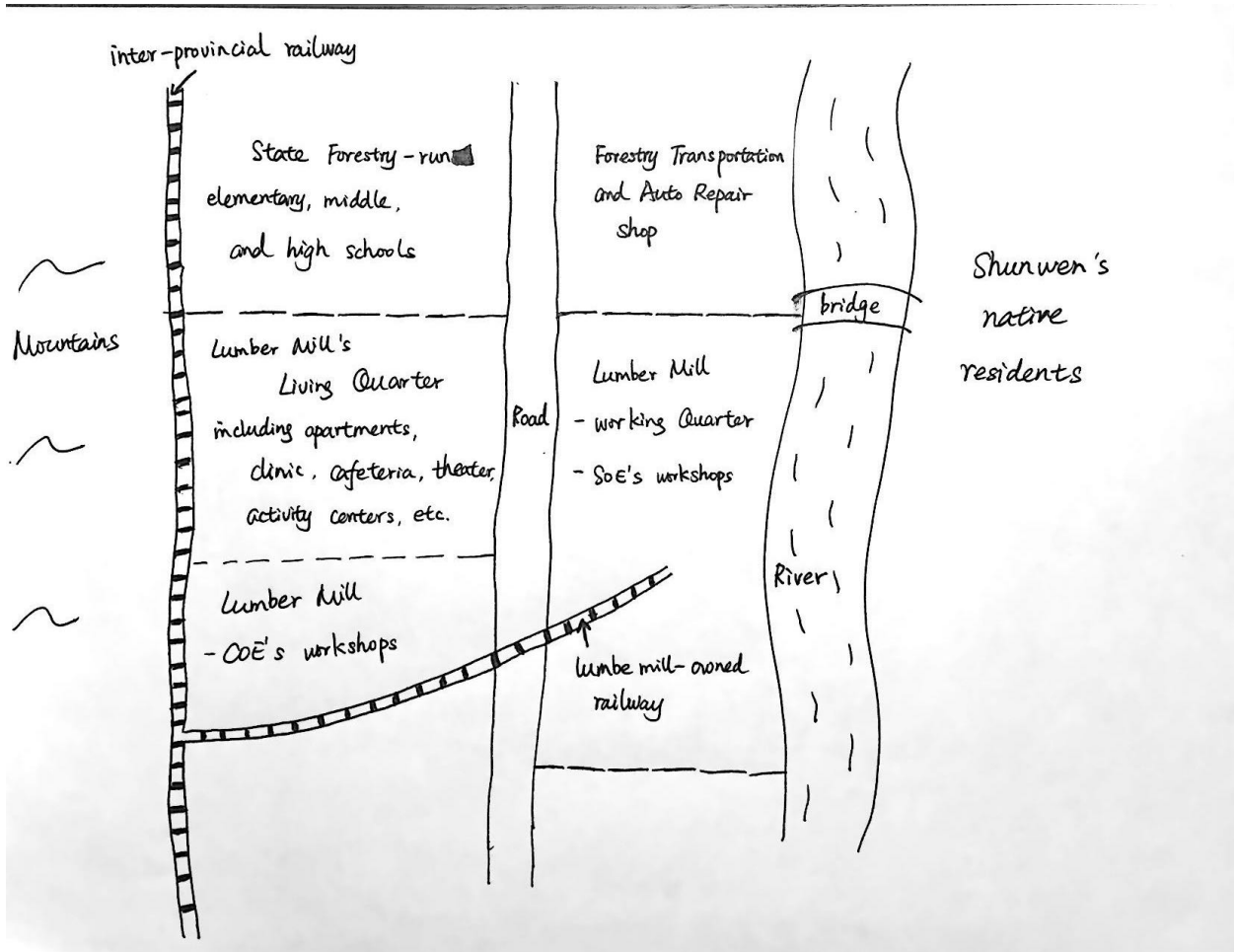
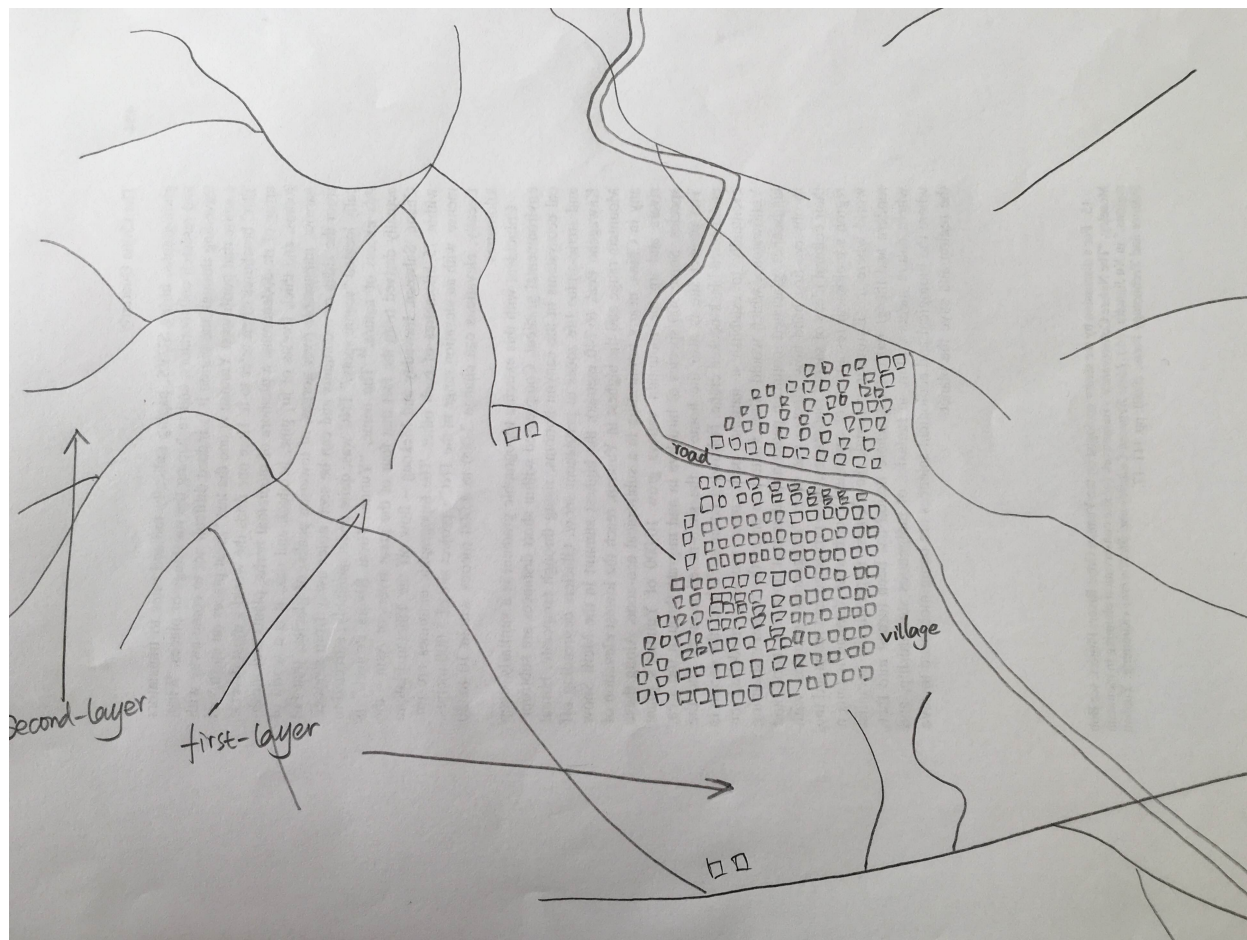


Figure 6. Photos of Zhangcuo Logging Camp in March 2014



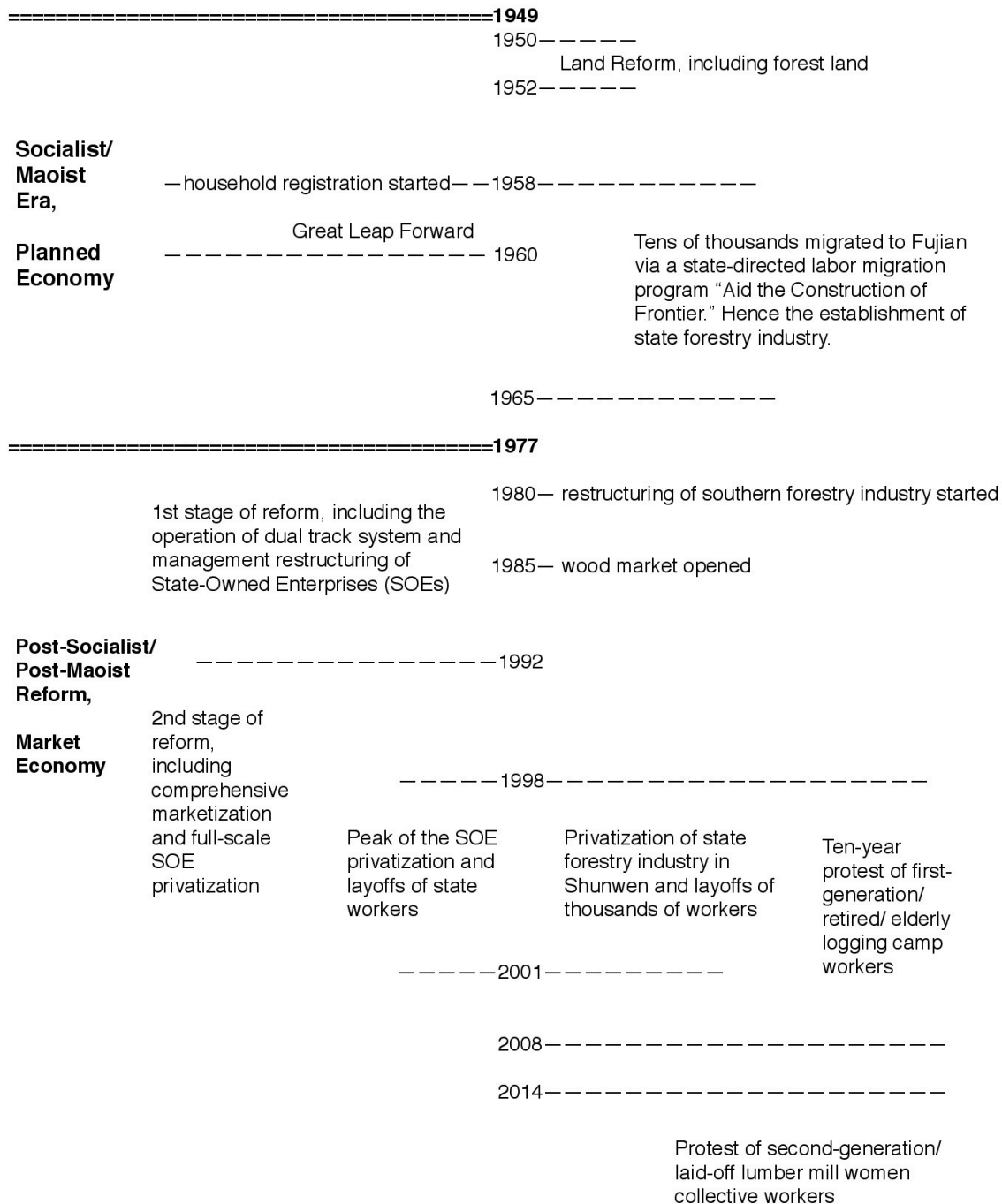
Zhangcuo Logging Camp, 2014, photographed by Shuxuan Zhou. The first building (top left) was a combination of offices, archive, and cafeteria, and is still used as an archive and by the remaining workers as a kitchen. The second building (top right) was the workers' family apartments. The third one (bottom left) was used as several offices and an activity center. The fourth (bottom right) was the place for mailboxes and security guards. The latter three buildings are all unused and empty now.

Figure 7. Illustration of “First-Layer Mountains” and “Second-Layer Mountains”



2015, illustrated by Shuxuan Zhou.

Figure 8. Timeline of Forestry Reforms



Glossary

Chinese Characters 汉字	pin yin	English Translation	Abbreviation
国有企业，国营企业	guo you qi ye, guo ying qi ye	state enterprise, state-owned enterprise	SOE
(国企)工人，国营工	(guo qi) gong ren, guo ying gong	state worker, SOE worker	
集体企业	ji ti qi ye	collective enterprise, collective-owned enterprise	COE
集体工	ji ti gong	collective worker, COE worker	
家属(工)	jia shu (gong)	family dependent (worker)	
家属生产队	jia shu sheng chan dui	family dependent production team	FDPT
贮木场	zhu mu chang	sawmill, lumber mill	
伐木场	fa mu chang	logging camp	
林业局	lin ye ju	forestry bureau	
下岗	xia gang	laid-off/ leaving work positions	
下放	xia fang	laid-off/ sent down	
买断	mai duan	buy off/ severance	
县	xian	county	
乡镇	xiang zhen	township	
村	cun	village	
街道	jie dao	urban district	
户口	hu kou	household registry	

Introduction

In 2008, I revisited the Shunwen Lumber Mill where my parents, maternal grandmother, and other extended family members had worked for over three decades and where I'd spent most of my childhood. Located in Shunwen, a mountainous county in northern Fujian, this state lumber mill was originally built by a thousand or so workers who had migrated from Shandong, Zhejiang, and other parts of Fujian in the late 1950s through the state-directed "Aid The Frontier Construction" project. Initiated by the Chinese central government, the project's migration programs moved large numbers of workers from populous and impoverished regions to the national borderland to enhance its industrial and military capacities. Fujian was targeted in these programs as the military frontier against Taiwan. The Shunwen Lumber Mill thrived for forty years and underwent gradual privatization through the late 1990s and early 2000s. All of my family members who had worked at the lumber mill were laid-off during privatization, and we left Shunwen in 2001. The official narrative about laid-off workers in China highlights the stories of former Chinese women workers who later became successful entrepreneurs. But in learning of the reality for my family members and their former mill colleagues, I heard many diverse and complicated life stories. I also observed that privatization had different impacts on women's and men's lives, and the relations between them. When I returned in 2008 and conducted preliminary semi-structured interviews with thirteen laid-off women workers, my goal was to articulate how men and women experienced their post-layoff lives and reemployment situations differently.

In the interviews, these women workers educated me about the relation between state

enterprises and collective enterprises as well as how they, as women workers of collective enterprises, had encountered double discrimination. From the late 1950s to the early 1980s, following Chinese central and provincial government regulations, city and county governments nationwide established many collective enterprises by grouping together independent handicraft and light industry workers across the city or county. Women comprised more than half of the total workers in urban collective enterprises (Tang and Ma 1985). Chinese and western feminist scholars at that time and in the following early reform stage criticized this policy as the socialist state taking advantage of women workers as temporary and cheaper labor force (Croll 1983, Stacey 1983, Wolf 1985). The Shunwen Lumber Mill established a collective enterprise in 1980. The collective workers' income was generally lower than that of the mostly male state workers; and the collective workers were the first group to be fired whenever the economy encountered difficulties. However this history was soon forgotten when the post-socialist reform developed into its second stage (see Figure 8), so decades later when women collective workers were laid off during enterprise privatization, neither the official pro-privatization discourse nor the critical voices against the privatization and layoff policy talked about the difference between them and other state (mostly male) workers.

The collective enterprise of the Shunwen Lumber Mill had a more complicated background than those built by city and county governments discussed above. It grew out of the mill's Family Dependent Production Team (FDPT), which was created around 1960 and included the first-generation male state workers' wives. The mill used these dependents as temporary employees. In 1980, the state lumber mill started a collective enterprise composed of dependent workers from the FDPT and the unemployed children (mostly daughters) of first-generation

workers.¹ The official narrative claimed that the main purpose of having the FDPT and then the collective enterprise was to reuse the byproducts and wastes of the lumber mill and to make full use of unemployed, low-skilled family members of the workers; that is to say, this was conveyed as a special treatment for the worker families. However, the dependent workers and collective workers disagreed with this narrative. They believed that their jobs were as difficult as, if not harder than, those of the state workers, and they created high profits for the enterprise, so their employment was not “a special treatment” but a significant contribution to the state. The nature of this state enterprise-affiliated collective enterprise and the status of its workers became the focus of debate when the collective workers began their protests in 2014.

At the beginning of 2014, midway through my year of fieldwork, the collective women workers undertook collective action to fight for more compensation for the loss of their jobs and collective property during enterprise privatization in 2000. The major point of contention between the local government and the protesting workers was about how to categorize various properties and workers, as national law and local privatization policy regulated the properties and workers of a state enterprise and a collective enterprise quite differently. In their protest speeches, the workers often talked about the double discrimination that they as collective workers and women encountered before and after enterprise privatization. Their memories of individual experiences of inequalities that had once been hidden by official discourse on gender equality and labor rights were revealed through collective storytelling. These counter narratives,

¹ In my writing, I use “family dependents,” “family dependent workers,” and “dependent workers” interchangeably to refer to family dependent workers. I use “state workers” and “SOE workers” to refer to the state-owned enterprise workers, and use “workers” to refer to all of the workers together.

initially everyday private complaints repeated over and over, ended up inflaming a collective resistance in the streets. On February 26, 2014, more than two hundred retired and laid-off women workers blocked the door of the Shunwen County government's administration building, chanting and requesting to meet with the mayor. They succeeded in breaking through the cordon of police officers and flooded into the main office building. In their subsequent meeting with the deputy mayor and county Forestry Bureau director, the women workers won the debate based on their critical analysis of lumber mill history and legal regulations, and therefore were able to pressure the county government into re-investigating their complaint. Over the next half year the women activists visited the Forestry Bureau and the county government offices almost every day and actively participated in the investigation. They eventually showed up unexpectedly on an official "day to meet the mayor" and presented evidence for the investigation they had collected in secret. Finally, the county government agreed to compensate these women workers seven million yuan. Through this process, I witnessed the women workers tactically navigate diverse discourses from different historical junctures, legal categories, and value systems. They argued for better pensions and layoff compensation based on their labor contributions to their former work unit. They also claimed ownership over some of the enterprise's land and assets by capitalizing on private property legal protections in post-socialist China. They reaffirmed the government's responsibility for its citizens, a value system rooted far back in Chinese history, while also taking advantage of a recent central government anti-corruption campaign (Perry 2008).

My research centers the workers' collective memories and personal narratives as I observed how these individuals' memories and narratives of their experiences of injustices

converged into collective action. In addition to the 2014 protest, another good example of this kind of convergence is a ten-year protest conducted by elderly logging camp workers from 1998 to 2008. The female elders who worked for the logging camps were considered by the state forestry industry and the forestry worker community as “family dependents”, doing seasonal, temporary, and reproductive/non-profitable jobs, and therefore were not registered as “workers.”² As a result, the logging camps did not pay for their social security benefits after reform of the Chinese social security system beginning in the 1990s, and they had no pension at all after restructuring of the logging camps took place around 2000. Over a period of ten years more than a thousand women workers and their husbands, the male logging camp workers, petitioned different levels of government non-stop for recognition of their status as workers and right to pension payments. The literate male workers were the major force in learning and articulating legal provisions to sue the local government and forestry bureau. Meanwhile the female workers, who were almost all illiterate, repeatedly talked openly about the many forms of suffering they had endured as workers in the mountainous logging camps. They used the adjective “bitter” to summarize and underscore the difficulties in their jobs and lives. After publicly speaking their bitterness in front of officials for ten years, the county government finally agreed to pay the elderly women workers monthly allowances, even though they did not end up winning their case against the local government in court.

Through my interviews with the elder women workers I found that “speaking bitterness”

² Refer to the following Chinese articles for more historical stories of the family dependent workers in China: 宋少鹏: 《“老会战”和大庆油田: 萨尔图的故事》, 载《开放时代》2012年第3期; 宋少鹏: 《中建一局建设发展公司: 建筑铁军里的“娘子军”》, 载《开放时代》2012年第5期; 宋少鹏: 《鞍钢二薄综合厂: 厂办大集体的前世今生》, 载《开放时代》2012年第9期。以上三篇均为《开放时代》封二、封三的“国营厂矿”系列文章。

was the most common master script they used to tell their life stories. This finding was first revealed for me through my observation of the mode of storytelling used by my own maternal grandmother, a former state lumber mill worker, to share her life story. Over the past several decades, my grandmother regularly told of her life's hardships, first to the leaders of her work unit in order to ask for support for her family and to secure her children's jobs in her unit, and then to her family members after the lumber mill was privatized. Her repetitive storytelling was perceived as demanding complaints to her children, which unfortunately created a lot of tensions between her and her children, especially when they were laid off after 2000 and did not have adequate time, money, and energy to respond to her emotional and material needs. I lived with her in the summer of 2011 conducting formal and informal interviews, through which I obtained a new understanding of those conflicts in my extended family. As Gail Hershatter proposed in her article "Disquiet in The House of Gender," my grandmother's iterative performances of speaking bitterness across diverse contexts were "the moments when the political is personal" (2012, 879). Through these moments, I came to see how China's revolutions, reforms, and other macro social transformations over the past decades manifested themselves in the micro entanglements of my family. My grandmother learned the format of speaking bitterness from her participation in Maoist public consciousness raising meetings in her work unit and later appropriated this model for her personal needs. In my focus on the shifting contexts in which it is employed, I consider speaking bitterness a genre of narrative performance that blurs the line between productive and reproductive labor, the public and the private (Zhou 2015).

Inspired by my grandmother's story, I decided to continue interviewing forestry workers in 2013; this second stage utilized a research method of life history interviewing to collect the

oral histories of the first-generation workers. Feminist oral history research raises the question about differences between mainstream narratives and a marginalized group's lived experience and variations within that group. Such research attempts to challenge the stereotypes within dominant discourse by paying close attention to the voices of the underrepresented (Behar 1993, Gluck and Patai 1991, Johnson 2008, Barbre and Personal Narrative Group 1989). Utilizing women's oral history does not merely fill gaps in conventional text-based written history by adding women's experience, but is also a way to enable women as knowers to talk about their own experience in their own language (words and patterns), and in accordance with what they believe and their perspective. The "truth" I pursued by listening to women workers' life stories does not lie just in the content per se, but also in how storytellers remember, forget, narrate, and perform their stories. In order to let the women narrate their life stories in their own ways, I usually started my interviews with questions such as "why and how did you come here? (你当年为什么 / 怎么来这儿的?)" or "tell me about what happened to you in the past. (给我讲讲你们以前的事吧。)" After that, our conversations would mostly follow their thoughts, with me asking for further detail or about what happened next as prompts. During my listening, I paid particular attention to the women's self-evaluative comments on their own stories, the individual storytellers' organization of their own experiences, and the patterns that characterized the conversation within this specific group of women. In the interviews all of the women workers linked their individual life stories and labor experiences with an internal feeling of "bitterness." Each woman's social experience and feeling is "not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating," however "it is a structured formation." The formation

was structured by the shared “meanings and values” that the women workers “actively lived and felt” through their collective work and layoff experiences. The individual storytelling of their life stories and personal feelings of “bitterness,” I argue, coalesced over time into a public affect, a political technique, and a social relation. These “structures of feeling” became resources for their collective resistance and resulted in their gendered narrative performance and division of labor in protest organization and action (Williams 1977, 132-134).

Placing personal narratives and experiences at the center of my research not only calls the dominant macro history into question, but also brings new insights into the politics of resistance. Furthermore, it offers an important opportunity to scrutinize three key debates in Chinese feminist history and thereby challenge historiographies of both China and social movements. First of all, these women’s lived experiences and protests complicate popular and scholarly comprehensions of Maoist gender-related policies and their legacy in contemporary China. The state patriarchy and top-down approach failed to achieve gender equality in the realm of employment, but the resultant increase in women’s political participation in socialist China gave the women workers resources to fight the injustices they experienced in post-socialist China. Second, my study of women workers’ repeated experiences of labor mobilization and demobilization extends the temporality of the “women going home” debate in Chinese history, which leads to a re-theorization of the relationships between gender and development. The conventional understanding of the “women going home” debate in China today places this discourse in a particular time of the late 1980s onward, and interprets it as a relatively new phenomenon kindled by China’s post-1970s economic reform. The life history narratives of the elderly women workers showed instead that Chinese women had experienced this issue from the

Maoist era onward, yet it was disguised by a rhetoric that women participating in socialist liberation would go out of their homes and join the public work force. In fact, this debate in the realm of policy making and public discussion took place every time China experienced economic distress throughout the twentieth century; as a result, women have been considered a “surplus labor force” and repeatedly sent back to the domestic sphere by either national policy or the job market. I argue that studying “women going home” as a debate throughout the history of PRC leads to the re-theorization of the use of gender in development policies relative to the urban/rural division. Lastly, attention to the forestry women workers’ protests critiques the narrow scope of the current dominant debate on the “contemporary Chinese feminist movement” by proposing to include non-feminist identified people’s fights for gender equity into the historiography. My study analyzes why these workers chose to deploy other discourses than “gender,” and compares the tactics, forms, and targeted audiences of protests conducted by different generations of activists, to further elaborate the significance of the inclusion of struggles of non-feminist identified groups into studies of feminist movements.

Legacies of Maoist Gender Project

In the early years of the People’s Republic, China implemented a series of policies directing urban and rural women into public, political and economic domains under the well-known Maoist rhetoric “women hold up half the sky.” This rhetoric and its related policies were once admired from a distance by western feminists and Marxists in the 1960s to the 1970s, yet have been questioned by Chinese women, Chinese popular discourse, and western feminist scholars of China since the late 1970s. Urban Chinese women, particularly elite female writers

including Zhang Jie and Zhang Xinxin, worried that the rhetoric “women can do what men can do” (男人能做的, 女人也能做) and “women’s liberation” (妇女解放) concealed “women’s female identity” (女性身份) and held that the policies neglected women’s struggles related to romantic love, marriage, family, and the female body (Zhong 2009). Dai Jinhua and other Chinese feminist scholars criticized the Maoist approach because it discursively made invisible the differences between individual women in order to construct a homogeneous entity of “Chinese women” and it failed to culturally transform women to be truly independent and autonomous (Dai 2004). In one strand of critique, Chinese scholars claimed that Chinese women, therefore, still did not have a real consciousness of gender equality. Western feminist scholars, mainly anthropologists and historians using participant observation and archival methods, discovered gaps between the official rhetoric of “women’s liberation” and practice on the ground. Some examples of these gaps include women carrying the “double burdens” of paid jobs and unpaid domestic labor, cheaper female labor, and big differences in policy enacted for cities and villages (Croll 1983, Davin 1979, Johnson 1983, Stacey 1983). These scholars thus called the Maoist gender project “revolution postponed” and referred to it as the “unfinished liberation of Chinese women” (Andors 1983, Wolf 1985). In the 1990s, international post-modern and post-structuralist feminists further questioned this socialist women’s liberation program that saw modernization and development as its primary goal. They asked: first, did these government-initiated top-down policies, which considered women as objects of protection and re/productive labor extraction, increase women’s reliance upon state patriarchy and cause a false consciousness of gender equity instead of actually creating gender equity? Secondly, since joining the public labor domain was considered the only path to women’s liberation, did women who started

working outside the home actually experience liberation in other aspects of their lives? Did “women hold up half the sky” only function as a call for more employment? Thirdly, was the Maoist gender project essentially androcentric, and therefore not effective in developing women’s gender equity consciousness?

My research reflects upon the above debates, particularly the last three questions. I agree with certain feminists’ concern that women might over-rely on the state to initiate political programs to erase social inequalities and protect citizens, and thus lack the form of political consciousness about the necessity to resist the nation-state to achieve their self-determination and liberation. A top-down policy runs the very risk of over-generalization in that it does not treat women as independent and varied individuals, so its protection of women is very likely fragile. For example, state women workers were supported by the state and their work units during the peak era of socialism, and they depended on the state enterprises in all aspects of their lives. My interviewees told me they had trusted that the state would protect them for life and had no sense of crisis at all until enterprise privatization. Many of them still believed the government would fund their basic living needs and help them find reemployment when they were laid off. However, during privatization, local enactment of the central government’s layoff policies did not take into consideration the distinctions between male and female workers or differences among women workers. For example, the women forestry workers in my field site had much lower pensions than men or none at all, and many of them earned below the local poverty line.

Does women’s reliance on the state mean that they cannot resist state policies that affect them materially and dismiss them discursively? Even though the top-down Maoist gender project did not achieve nation-wide gender equality in employment, it brought about dramatic changes in

other aspects of women's lives, including the space of their activities. Working in urban factories did not merely shape the domain of production, but also transformed women workers' cultural and social lives. They gained experiences of public participation and civil engagement. They also developed an expectation of the state's role in securing their employment and basic livelihood. These combined experiential factors meant that when they felt betrayed by the state, which had not fulfilled its promise to them, the women workers' resentment grew into collective action. Moreover, besides providing employment, the state enterprises had been instrumental in enacting political mobilization as well. For instance, in the early socialist era women workers were organized to participate in "speaking bitterness" sessions within the context of their work units. The format of "speaking bitterness," I maintain, became a key resource they could utilize to empower their own political voices in post-socialist China. Additionally, "speaking bitterness" and participation in other public activities could result in the transformation of their private lives as well. The story of my grandmother, who used "speaking bitterness" as a technique to seek support for her family and also to pursue recognition from her family members. For these reasons, our analysis of the Maoist project of promoting women's gender equality in terms of consciousness and capacities of resistance should not be a black and white assessment.

Hegemony, as a concept developed by cultural Marxists to refer to a pervasive, lived experience of power relations, produces subaltern contradictory consciousness (Gramsci 1999 (1971), Hall 1987, 1996 (1986), Williams 1977). This contradictory consciousness is composed of a common sense that adapted uncritically from the past and yet is "fragmentary, incoherent, and inconsequential" as well as a good sense that is a "coherent and systematic philosophy" (Gramsci 1999 (1971), 419). The forestry women workers, on one hand, trusted the

government to protect their livelihoods and families, as they had been promised in the socialist era. On the other hand, they had a critical analysis based on their decades of lived experience that the government had taken advantage of their labor, colluded with capitalists, and maintained societal inequalities. The concept of contradictory consciousness therefore helps us find an interpretation of women workers and their relationship with the socialist past in between the simplistic notions of false consciousness and romantic views of resistance.

The Debate on “Women Going Home”

Whenever the Chinese national economy has encountered downturns in recent decades, the public, scholars, and policy makers have entered into debate about whether women with paid employment should return to the domestic sphere. This intellectual and policy debate on “women going home (妇女回家, 让女人回家)” has peaked four times since the 1980s in reform-era China, instigated by widely circulated publications or official pronouncements. People in support of women’s return home claim that it can help reduce labor oversupply and thus benefit the national economy, that women would have more time to take care of their children and families, and it would also improve women’s emotional and general wellbeing. In 1988, *Women of China*, an All China Women’s Federation sponsored magazine hosted a public discussion on the question, “employment or return home— where is the way out for women? (就业还是回家——妇女出路在哪里?).” This discussion was initiated by a female reader of the magazine, whose job was terminated because she used a lot of leave time to care for her children. She complained about a lack of societal and policy support for working mothers and raised the question of

fairness. In 1994, well-known sociologist Zhen Yefu published a controversial article asserting the Chinese women's liberation project had progressed "beyond normal speed (超前)" and analyzing its negative influences on families. In 2001, Wang Xiancai, a male member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), gave a speech "encouraging women, on a voluntary basis, to go back home to the realm of domestic work," particularly low-income married women, as a means to achieve a more efficient gendered division of labor and better care of children. This speech sparked a contentious debate in the broader society. Some people considered his proposal regressive, which would make all of the socialist gender equality policies futile. Others agreed with Wang and claimed that we should also make sure to secure housewives' economic rights and social status. In 2011, another CPPCC member, Zhang Xiaomei, proposed a bill to motivate affluent middle-class women to return home. She claimed that women were naturally better at taking care of families and that allowing women to choose to stay at home could release them from the double burden imposed by career and family. Her bill was not enacted. Song Shaopeng (2011) examines these four crests of this debate to analyze how Chinese mainstream ideology shifted from a belief in Marxist women's liberation theory to neoliberalism with the deepening of capitalist market-oriented reforms and changes in the social structure. In this process, Song states that a cultural discourse of "women's freedom in choice" replaced an economic perspective of "equality between men and women" as the key criteria in society's value system, and the promotion of individuality and personal autonomy transcended criticism of the overall social structure.

My research extends the temporality of the debate on "women going home" in conventional written history from the reform era back to a much earlier time and points to its

recursive appearance. In the 1920s-30s Republican China, an earlier version of this debate revolved around a modern “Good Wife, Wise Mother” discourse and Lu Xun’s provocative 1923 talk at a women’s college, “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home?” A wide range of opinions emerged as part of this debate through arguments about women’s responsibilities to the family, husband, children, society and nation. An intellectual and policy discussion regarding whether women should go home recurred in Maoist China alongside several related nation-wide policies. One of these policies was often mentioned by the women forestry workers I interviewed. Many rural women, including my interviewees, were recruited into urban factories to work during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) but were sent back to their home villages when these factories’ production contracted. This history repeated itself in the late 1980s of reform-era China. When tens of millions of Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) thrived in rural China in the early 1980s, they absorbed a lot of the female labor force. However, when TVEs started declining in the late 1980s and the household once again became the more important unit of the rural economy, women workers were dismissed from their jobs first, before male coworkers, and went back home to support their families. A comparison of the histories of women being laid off after the Great Leap Forward in the 1960s, after the bankruptcy of TVEs in the 1980s, and during the privatization of state enterprises in the 1990s and 2000s reveals a relationship between the “women going home” debate and development policies of the Chinese state. “Women going home,” as both a discourse and a philosophy of policy making, reiteratively took place in the history of China as a modernization project and a development regime, but the history of it as such has always been forgotten before the next historical turn of recruitment of women into public employment.

I also argue that an intersectional analysis of gender difference and rural-urban division as constructed unequal power relations would help further examine the policy and discourse of “women going home.” In its pursuit of modernization and economic development, albeit at different historical junctures, the Chinese state institutionalized hierarchical binaries of gender differences and rural-urban divisions in the realms of employment, the market, and welfare. The development policies then took advantage of the labor force of those on the intersectional underside within the power structure. Most literature on Chinese economic development only looks into development policies beginning in the post-1970s reform period, without questioning the continuity of developmentalism from the socialist state to the post-socialist time. The Chinese socialist regime also promoted the development of the national economy, from primitive to modern or industrialized, as a major goal, with the assumption that development was a linear movement from one stage to another. If one were only to study the development policies in reform-era China, one might simply conclude that Chinese development (and even the development of all third world countries) merely aims to follow the path of Euro-American countries. However, an examination of socialist development projects in China, through their recursive mobilization and demobilization of rural female labor, makes it obvious that China has taken its own path to development and modernization, amidst its discourse of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism.

Wen Tiejun (2000) provides a historical narrative of rural-urban relations in socialist China in which urban China realized its industrialization by internally accumulating primary capital through the exploitation of agricultural surplus, while the West plundered foreign resources through colonialism to achieve the same goal. Wen’s discussion, however, overlooks

the role of constructed gender differences in this process of capital accumulation, while Song Shaopeng's analysis does not touch upon how the rural-urban division has shaped "women going home" debates and related policies that often resulted in rural women being the first to be sent back home. Investigation into the exploitation of rural female labor is not new in China Studies, but this kind of exploitation in Maoist China has not been studied enough. As one of the CCP's revolutionary icons, rural women were symbolically and discursively acknowledged and valued in Maoist China, thus disguising their experienced material exploitation. Thus, I argue an intersectional analysis of when and how surplus labor was included and excluded in socialist China, and that examines the interlocking power structures of rural-urban relations and gender, is much needed.

Revising the Historiography of "Chinese Feminist Movements"

In Anne Enke's book *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (2007), she looks closely into women's interventions in urban public space in three big U.S. cities in the 1960s and 70s, and claims that it was these activities initiated by both feminist-identified and non-feminist-identified women that created a massive outbreak of U.S. second-wave feminism. Enke's research expands and revises the historiography of second-wave feminism and sheds light on hierarchies within the movement. When conducting my dissertation research, particularly from 2012 onward, I have considered my work's possible intervention in the scholarship on feminist movements in China. Several groups of young Chinese feminists, mostly college students and recent graduates, recently received broad societal attention as they conducted performance street art and launched petitions on social media to provoke dialogue on

gender issues. On March 7th 2015, five of them were detained by the Chinese police for over a month because they had planned to conduct an anti-sexual harassment campaign in several public spaces the next day, International Working Women's Day. This incident resulted in widespread reporting on their actions and the state response in international media. Their comrades and sympathetic journalists called the activism of the Feminist Five a symbol of "the coming of age of Chinese feminism" and "Chinese feminist awakening." One of the writers highlighted the importance of their activism by claiming "it is the first time that the [Chinese feminist] movement has taken a bottom-up approach."³ Wang Zheng's (1999) collection of oral histories of Chinese women activists around the 1919 May Fourth Movement as well as Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko's (2013) translation and interpretation of anarcho-feminist He-Yin Zhen's (1884-1920?) writings easily challenge the above statement as an oversimplification that fails to recognize the rich historiography and representations of the Chinese feminist movement. I would like to pose one further question: Besides self-identified feminist writers and activists, should we include the struggles of other non-feminist identified Chinese women within the history of Chinese feminist movements, as Enke did in her book on the U.S. women's movement? When scholars exclude some women's fights against gender-related injustices from the history of feminist movements, do we replicate institutionalized gender hierarchies that those women and we feminist scholars attempt to challenge?

The Chinese central and local governments institutionalized gendered divisions in labor and the provision of pension throughout socialist and post-socialist times. The two generations of

³ https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/14/opinion/xiao-meili-chinas-feminist-awakening.html?_r=0
<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/5/the-coming-of-age-of-chinese-feminism.html> This quote is cited from the first article.

women forestry workers I interviewed were thus disproportionately treated as cheap and temporary labor, and received much less in terms of pension. They spent years fighting against these institutional inequalities, telling their stories of bodily and emotional hardship in order to valorize their labor and life experiences. They never self-identified as feminists; they did not even highlight their identities as women in their collective resistance. The elder women logging camp workers called themselves “family dependents” in their ten-year protest, while the middle-age women lumber mill workers fought as “collective enterprise workers.” Why did they not underscore the women’s issues or gender identity in their endeavors, as the recent actions of young Chinese feminist activists have? First, the Maoist gender project did not instill in Chinese women (or men) a consciousness about equity that necessarily centers on gender divisions. The forestry workers wove their value system about justice around the belief that their labor contribution deserves rewards and compensation. The elderly workers underscored the fact that family dependents did a great deal of physically demanding and onerous work for the state logging camps, therefore the government and the logging camps should provide pensions to them just as they have for state workers. The middle-aged collective workers, in order to argue that they have a right to receive the same amount of layoff compensation and pension, recalled that they did the same type and amount of labor, but were treated worse than their state worker counterparts before, during, and after the enterprise privatization.. “Men and women are equal (男女平等)” and “Equal pay for equal work (同工同酬)” were both well-known rhetorics and principles for policy making in socialist China. It appears that the forestry workers perceived the latter one as better than the former in their consciousness of equity, and accordingly relied on it in their protests. They gained awareness of institutional inequalities almost always through their

observation of unequal pay to equal amount of work. Gender difference is not a crucial analytic of unequal power relations for them, although the differences in gendered experience seem to have influenced their organizational tactics and divisions of labor.

Second, the tactics that the young Chinese feminist activists deploy would not work if used by the laid-off women workers. The young Chinese feminist activists are most famous for their activism in anti-sexual harassment, anti-domestic violence, anti-sex discrimination in employment and university admissions, and insufficient toilets for women. They mostly utilized street performance and online petition as tools to spark public debates. These themes and tools attracted a lot of attention from mostly young, college educated women in urban China, as they are very relevant to and can be easily understood by this audience. However, as post-socialist discourse discriminates against laid-off workers in general, the forestry workers' gender-related issues were buried under the narrative that neither male nor female laid-off workers are valuable and productive bodies. Besides, they do not have the necessary skills to start online campaigns, and their sense of aesthetics as well as that of their targeted audience does not include an appreciation for street performance and other modern art forms. Protesters are performers of actions showing dissent, and the form of their protest channels their disagreement to a particular public, which must be able to recognize and understand their specific aesthetics. Shared aesthetics sensibilities differ among generational and political groups, and also lead to different social relations. The forestry workers used sit-in demonstrations; petitions, either paper or face-to-face, presented through official governmental systems; and speaking bitterness in front of cadres and officials. Their use of these methods is due not only to the fact they are less internet savvy than young activists, but more importantly because these are the forms that can best ease

their feelings of resentment. The state workers and their families built the state enterprises together and believed their labor contribution to the state would make them honorable and valuable. In the socialist era, factory cadres acted as agents of the state listening to the workers' complaints and endeavoring to solve the problems for them. The workers thus had a social and emotional relation to the embodied state power. However, after privatization the state stopped listening to the workers and the social and emotional relation between the workers and the state changed. Upon losing their jobs, the workers felt abandoned and betrayed by the state, and they felt the need to be heard by its representatives: officials and cadres. The forms of protest they chose afforded them opportunities to speak directly to state representatives and to recall and voice complaints of the injustices they experienced during both labor mobilization and demobilization initiated by the state. The form of their protest was as important as the outcome of the protest; it brought emotional validation, while the resolution was mainly material. Nevertheless, because the forms and aesthetics of their protests are considered unfashionable and outdated in the current context, their voices and stories were not heard in popular media and the broader society. This marginalization would be compounded if we as feminist scholars excluded them from our scholarly writings and documentation of Chinese feminist movements.

As a young Chinese feminist who is living overseas, I support the activism of the group of young feminists in mainland China remotely by participating in and sharing activist-initiated online discussions, marching with posters calling for the release of detained activists, etc. I appreciate the young activists' efforts to raise public attention to issues related to gender and sexuality and have often been amazed by their creative approaches to activism. But I'm also worried about the generational gap between those young activists who have attracted the

spotlight and the middle-aged and elderly activists who deploy forms of protest currently perceived as antiquated and boring. As a student of gender studies and social movements in China, I envision my work as helping bridge this generational divide, to acknowledge these women workers' endeavors in fighting gender-based inequalities and exploitations, and to build a greater coalition across social justice movements, including those that do not specifically utilize the discourses of "gender" and "feminism."

Dissertation Summary

Shortly following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the forestry industry was nationalized in the 1950s. However, this industry was privatized in the late 1990s amid China's post-1970s neoliberal economic reforms regarding efficiency and productivity; these reforms also attempted to address global environmental concerns about forest conservation. The first chapter of my dissertation, "Gendering of Forestry Labor in Northern Fujian, 1950s-2010s," establishes the background of how, in the 1950s, the socialist state institutionalized gendered divisions of labor within the family using state-directed migration programs and the establishment of the state forestry industry. With the creation of the forestry industry, women workers were considered "dependents" of their husbands and assigned temporary labor duties, without social security benefits. This chapter examines the continuing gendered division of labor in the current privatized forestry industry and traces discontinuities in the workers' gendered subjectivities between the pre- and post-reform eras. Chapter Two, "Forestry Danwei in Transition: Contesting Space and Invisible Bodies," offers a geographical analysis of how the lives of forestry workers and native peasants in and around the forestry work

units (*danwei*) were interrelated and how they were transformed amidst shifts in forest resource policy. It argues that changes in workers' identities were influenced by the state's spatial construction of rural and urban, forest and factory, in both physical and discursive terms. These two chapters constitute Part I of my dissertation, which historicizes everyday experience and subject formation of forestry workers with particular attention to gender, generational, and rural-urban divisions. This is a history that the retired and laid-off state forestry workers revisited and reinterpreted over and over again in their collective actions from the 1990s to 2010s. Part II of my dissertation, including the next two chapters, focus on the workers' protests.

In Chapter Three, titled "Speaking Bitterness as Resistance: The Gendered Narrative Performance of The Elderly Forestry Workers," I show how the historical process of gendered labor and migration was later re-articulated by female and male workers during collective actions holding the state accountable for economic injustices in the post-socialist period. Because they were considered "dependents," no retired women workers received pensions after privatization, an economic fact that impacted the entire family unit. In response, in 1998, over one thousand elderly women workers from the logging camps, joined by some of their husbands, began petitioning the government over their lack of pensions. This chapter explores how these elderly protesters developed a gendered strategy in their fight: the male workers utilized a legal discourse to sue and negotiate with the local government officials on behalf of their families, while the female "dependents" resuscitated the Maoist mass-mobilization technique of "speaking bitterness" – publicly airing their previous workplace suffering in order to arouse sympathy from within the government system. In 2008, after ten years of protest, the local government finally conceded and compensated the "dependents" with monthly allowances. These workers

succeeded in pressuring a now neoliberal government to respond by recalling and reiteratively speaking of their labor experience during the socialist era.

In 2014, I became a participant observer to a second protest, this one against the local government and forestry bureau launched by middle-aged laid-off women timber mill workers asking for higher pensions and compensations for losses incurred through privatization. Chapter Four, “Coming into Differential Consciousness: The Collective Struggle of Lumber Mill Women Workers Fifteen Years After Their Layoff,” shows how women workers drew on and navigated among a broad repertoire of legal categories— property ownership, contracts, land rights—as well as a sense of state responsibility to ensure the survival of citizens who had sacrificed through years of labor for the nation. In the end, the local government agreed to pay the five hundred protesting women workers seven million yuan (each worker’s compensation was, on average, thirty times their monthly income) to “buy back” their assets. My comparison of these two collective actions shows the centrality of gender in how workers constructed subaltern subjectivities and mobilized different forms of legal and moral consciousness. In taking up state techniques originally used to mobilize a state-defined proletarian subaltern or to discursively marginalize “less productive and valued” laboring bodies, both groups turned these methods back around on the state itself, albeit in a different historical time, to valorize women’s labor and resist oppressions that had gone unrecognized by both state and society. These findings are significant because they stand in stark contrast to dominant Western narratives that only recognize liberating potential in methods of the neoliberal state; and to Marxist narratives that aims to explain all of the phenomena of oppression with the impacts of capitalism and neoliberalism.

Chapter I: Gendering of Forestry Labor in Northern Fujian, 1950s-2010s

In the spring of 2014 I sat in the courtyard of an apartment complex in Shunwen County, watching the elderly residents emerge from their homes. Just having finished their lunch, they chatted, played card games, or just rested. An elderly man held the brown root of an unknown plant in his left hand. With a curved blade in his right, he cut shoots from it, peeled and chopped it. A few others sat around him watching. Curious about the plant, I asked a grandmother who sat by me if she knew what it was and what the man was doing with it. She answered, “It’s a medicinal plant, and I don’t know its specific name and function. Only people who are from Zhejiang and Fujian, in the South, know. They often search for some medicinal plants in the woods and sell them. I came from Shandong, and we Northerners don’t recognize many special local plants.” The grandmother and the other elders in the courtyard had worked for state logging camps in Northern Fujian beginning in the 1950s, when they had migrated there through state-directed programs, until their retirement. Their individual journeys were part of a concerted effort in the 1950s and 1960s by the PRC to enhance its borderland military capacity and promote industrial development in remote regions through sizable monetary and human investments in its northwestern, southwestern, and southeastern frontiers. Many of these workers came from either the northern province of Shandong or several southern areas, including Zhejiang, Shanghai, and other parts of Fujian (see Figure 1). The grandmother conveyed the difficulties of adapting to a new working and living environment with this observation: “When we first came here in the 1950s, we didn’t even know how to climb the mountain. People always

ate the wrong mushrooms and got poisoned.” She further impressed upon me the challenges faced particularly by women workers, who were at that time categorized as “dependent workers” (*jiashu gong*, 家属工): “Didn’t we dependent workers need to pull out weeds, trim grass, and pick branches? We didn’t know much about local fauna, and many times we directly hit hornet nets. Lots of people got stung, some peoples’ tongues were swollen, and a few even died from that.”

Existent studies on the state-directed labor mobilization and industrialization in the 1950s and 1960s seldom address its gendered nature (Meyskens 2015, Naughton 1988). My research on the forestry industry in a mountainous area of northern Fujian explores labor and migration as gendered phenomena. I find that in spite of the official rhetoric of “women hold up half the sky,” both labor migration and the establishment of state forestry’s industrial production lines were fundamentally gendered, based on the assumption of men as family breadwinners and women as family dependents. Earlier feminist scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s criticized the gendering of labor in socialist China (1949-1976) and how the socialist state took advantage of female labor, framing it as flexibilized and exploitable. In the early twenty-first century, this scholarship was replaced by critics who mainly targeted global capitalism and neoliberalism’s impacts on Chinese rural migrant women in post-socialist China (1977-current). My study of forestry workers analyzes how the gendering of labor continued and was reshaped during the reform of former state-owned industries, with the privatization of forestry in Fujian around 2000 as my specific case. This chapter interweaves the history of Fujian’s forestry development with workers’ experiences of migration, labor, and job loss across different stages of this history. In each stage of reform, the Chinese central and local government institutionalized stratifications of

workers based on their gender, place of origin, and marital status and divided up the male and female workers' job positions, ranks, and welfare. This chapter applies an intersectional analytic lens to the history of forestry labor, with an emphasis on continuity and change across time. It therefore lays out the history that undergirds the following chapters, where I expand upon how workers revisited and re-interpreted this history for the purpose of understanding their current lives and mobilizing collective subaltern subjectivities for resistance to institutional discriminations.

Overview of State Forestry in Northern Fujian

Fujian forms part of China's southeastern coastal border. The southern and eastern parts of the province lie directly across the strait from Taiwan, while the northwestern inland area is mostly mountainous. The Wuyi Mountains marks the boundary between Fujian and Jiangxi provinces. I conducted fieldwork at Shunwen, a county (*xian*, 县) in Fujian that lies along this mountain range (see Figure 2). In 2012, Shunwen had a population of 300,000, with 180,000 people holding an urban *hukou* (户口, household registry) and 120,000 a rural *hukou*. Shunwen has fourteen rural townships (*xiangzhen*, 乡镇) and five urban street offices (*jiedao*, 街道). The fourteen rural townships include 160 villages in total. The five urban street offices are grouped together in the center, with all of the rural townships surrounding the urban core. Tunfu River—a branch of the Min River, central Fujian's major fresh water source—runs from the northwest of Shunwen through the central urban area to the southeast. An interprovincial railway and two major public roads (one intra-provincial road and one interprovincial road) were built along and

across the Tunfu River. After the railway was built in 1957 and state forestry industry established in northern Fujian the following year, trains shipped timber, lumber and other wood products from Shunwen to no less than 16 provinces outside Fujian in the socialist planned economy (see Figure 3).

In 2013, Fujian's 65.95 percent forest coverage was the highest among all Chinese provinces.⁴ Since the 1950s the central government has considered it to be one of the most crucial forestry areas in China. From the 1960s to 1990s, the state forestry industry in Shunwen County included a sawmill (*zhumu chang*, 贮木场), thirteen logging camps (*famu chang/caiyu chang*, 伐木场 / 采育场), a Forestry Transportation and Auto Repair Shop (FTARS, *linye qiche baoxiu chang*, 林业汽车保修场), several forestry road maintenance teams (*linye yangluduan*, 林业养路段), township forestry stations (*xiangzhen linyezhan*, 乡镇林业站), a forestry police department (*linye gongan*, 林业公安), a forestry product inspection station (*linye shengchan jiancezhan*, 林业生产监测站), and other administrative departments of the forestry bureau (*linye ju*, 林业局) (see Figure 4).

Shunwen Sawmill was located in the county's urban core. The thirteen logging camps were dispersed in various townships of Shunwen, and each was named after the township where they were located, even though the city directly managed them. The logging camps had driver teams. Their trucks fed the sawmill in the center with timber from all of the surrounding logging

⁴ General Situation of Forest Resources in China - Based on The Eighth National Survey of Forest Resource, 2013. (Zhongguo senlin ziyuan jiankuang- dibaci quanguo senlin ziyuan qingcha, 中国森林资源简况-第八次全国森林资源清查) <http://211.167.243.162:8085/8/book/jiankuang/index.html>

camps. The Forestry Transportation and Auto Repair Shop (FTARS), located close to the sawmill, shipped timber and wood products from the sawmill to nearby cities in northern Fujian and had its own workshops to maintain and repair its own vehicles and those of other related forestry units. The Shunwen Sawmill had its own railway that connected the timber storage field to the Shunwen train station, and thus linked to the aforementioned interprovincial railway. Trains shipped the lumber from the Shunwen Sawmill to other provinces. Like the logging camps, the forestry road maintenance teams were dispersed in different townships. They paved and maintained the roads wherever logging needed to be done. They also paved the roads for some villages in close proximity to the logging zones. Better roads became a benefit to villagers living near the logging zones. There were many Township Forestry Stations located in different townships. The stations monitored and helped the individual villagers or the village collectives manage their forests. The state forestry in Shunwen once had its own Forestry Police Force team that mainly dealt with illegal logging and harvesting. The team was incorporated into the city police in the mid-1990s. The responsibility of the Forestry Product Inspection Station was to check the quality of wood products and permit its sale. Selling (and even logging) wood products without expressly documented permission from the Product Inspection Station was illegal and monitored by the Forestry Police at points of sale and shipping. All of these units were managed under the Shunwen Forestry Bureau.⁵

The thousands of workers who moved to Fujian through the state-directed migration in

⁵ In fact, the Shunwen Sawmill was not originally managed by the Shunwen Forestry Bureau, but directly by the Fujian Provincial Forestry Department from the 1950s to the early 1980s. In the mid-1980s, the Shunwen Forestry Bureau took over this management role. The Forestry Bureau director Zeng who was in charge during the transition told me it was hard to manage a unit that had been considered province-directed for decades.

the late 1950s and early 60s made up the bulk of the labor force that established the state forestry industry in this area (see Figure 1). In 1958 the PRC established the national household registration (*hukou*) system.⁶ Once this law was in place the state strictly managed population migration, particularly movement between rural and urban areas as well as across different provinces. Essentially, the national and provincial governments coordinated migrations of big groups, while individuals moving of their own volition was forbidden.⁷ In 1958, after a two-province consultative conference held in Fujian's capital Fuzhou, approximately 20,000 (mostly male) workers were mobilized to migrate from rural Shandong to Fujian to "aid the mountainous area construction."⁸ Their families, mostly wives and children, migrated to join them a couple of years later.

Around 10,000 of these migrants ended up working for the forestry operations at Shunwen. Due to a lack of existing production facilities, the workers built the workshops, workers' apartments, roads and other infrastructure on their own. Later, in the midst of a protest in 2014, old sawmill workers told the story of digging into an empty field in the attempt to flatten it for storing logs. In the process, they unearthed many human bones and handcuffs and

⁶ On the January 9, 1958, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC passed and released the PRC's first household registration policy, titled "The People's Republic of China's Household Register Regulation" (中华人民共和国户口登记条例). This regulation established a very strict household registration management system, including seven required registrations: permanent residency, temporary residency, birth, death, migration in, migration out, and change.

⁷ Some first-generation Shandongese forestry workers told me that a few of them did successfully "escape" from Fujian back to Shandong without official permission.

⁸ Several workers mentioned the conference and the number of migrant workers. The interviewees are not sure about the number, and I have not been able to find a more accurate number.

speculated it had once been an execution ground. The workers were scared that disturbing human remains (and therefore the afterlives of those who had died) would bring bad fortune, or even might incur a worse curse upon themselves. In spite of all these difficulties and risks, they were proud that they survived and launched forestry production in the area. “We made huge contributions to this sawmill,” the workers concluded.

Legendary stories associated with the establishment of the state forestry industry were passed down to the next generation as well. Second-generation sawmill workers emphasized to me how their parents went through all of these difficulties to build the mill. As we sadly watched electric welders cutting a fallen ten-story high gantry crane into pieces during the 2014 demolition of the mill buildings, they mused, “Just imagine how the old-generation workers built this crane in the early 60s, when there were no big lifting machines or trucks, and all they could use were their own bodies.” Then, not content to leave the scene to my imagination, they explained, “They piled up the logs, and stood on top of the pile to weld the metal strips together. As they piled the logs higher and higher, the welded metal strips grew taller and taller to the height of ten stories. There was no equipment like a lift to assist—they did all the piling, climbing, and welding solely relying on their own bodies.” The workers were proud of their parents’ contribution to the establishment of the forestry industry in Shunwen, which was one of the main reasons they considered the privatization of the forestry around 2000 as unfair. When the workers witnessed individuals taking over the state-owned properties during this process, they felt upset that their parents’ sacrifice in the past was going to enrich private interests rather than the nation. The fact that the old generation workers sacrificed so much, while their children ended up losing jobs and living precarious lives, exacerbated their sense of injustice.

“We Didn’t Expect To Stay Here For Long:” A State-Directed Labor Migration Program

Forestry workers were mobilized to migrate from Shandong to Fujian in 1958 to 1960, from Zhejiang and Shanghai in 1960 to 1963, and from other areas of Fujian in 1963 to 1965 (see Figure 1). When asked about the initiation of this state-directed migration program, their reasons for participating in it, and their overall assessment of the program, the workers’ responses ranged from describing individual achievements and everyday survival to situating their personal stories within broader national projects of development and militarization. Regarding the government’s rationale for the state-directed migration program, Shandong workers recalled the need for industrial development in both Fujian and Shandong. Whereas Shandong was a populous province without much forestry, Fujian lacked the labor force necessary for its forestry development. Therefore, they explained, an exchange of resources was mutually beneficial. Or, as many workers summarized the exchange, “Shandong would give Fujian people, while Fujian gave Shandong wood.” In the early 1960s, railway construction in the PRC was limited not due to a lack of iron and steel, as is often supposed, but to the availability of suitable timber for the manufacture of ties (Richardson 1966). The PRC was also eager to develop forestry due to increased need for timber for building shafts in the mining industry. In the early stages, railway ties and mining timber were the two major products of Fujian’s forestry and both were crucial to the PRC’s early industrialization. In the planned economy, mountainous provinces like Fujian supported provinces like Shandong, which lacked forestry resources, with the constant shipment of timber.

Other workers pointed out that Fujian province, as a crucial region along the southeastern frontier, was a strategic location in the PRC’s military defense plan against Taiwan. It was due to

military considerations that, as with forestry, the iron and steel industry was established in Fujian in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁹ Both the forestry and iron and steel industries were built in the inland part of Fujian to avoid direct attack from Taiwan. Exemplifying the official narrative and national plan, in 1962 Lin Biao was worried that Guomindang forces from Taiwan might take advantage of the post-Great Leap Forward crisis to launch an attack on mainland cities. Lin believed that such an attack could not be successfully resisted in the coastal cities, especially if Guomindang forces were supported by the United States naval power. However, in the following years, the specific military threat from Taiwan and the U.S. did not materialize. Instead, American bombers were sent to attack North Vietnam in 1964. After that, the central government found that the concentration of industry in a few coastal urban regions made China extremely vulnerable, and thus decided to switch the focus of national investment to its remote western areas. This enormous investment and labor migration project, which lasted for seven years beginning in 1964, has been called the “Third Front Construction” (Naughton 1988). Accordingly, the Chinese central government stopped mobilizing workers to the forestry, iron, and steel industry of Fujian after 1965.

When recalling why they took part in the labor migration program, workers conveyed in my interviews with them diverse memories and complicated assessments of their choices at that time. Their agendas were a mix of seeking better living conditions and pursuing adventure. An old male worker recalled: “In 1958, I was a barefoot teacher in my hometown Laiyang, Shandong. Life was harsh and there was no food to eat. Just in time, Shandong Province sought

⁹ The biggest iron and steel state-owned factory of Fujian was at Sanming, a prefecture in the center of the province. It was restructured in 2000, and over 11,100 workers were laid off.

people to aid the mountain area construction of Fujian.”¹⁰ A woman worker put her motivation this way: “I was a teenager when I left Shanghai. I thought it would be fun to go somewhere else, and we thought we would just come for three years. Three years is not long anyway. We didn’t expect to end up being here for over fifty years.”¹¹ Another Shanghainese woman cited financial reasons for participating: “I was studying in middle school in Shanghai. Our family’s condition was hard, and Fujian happened to ask for people from Shanghai at that time. When they called for recruitment, they showed us the condition of the best logging camp with a small train and really good living conditions, and they described it as a good place for us.”¹²

The feelings they associated with joining the labor migration included the pride of being selected as well as of sacrificing for national development. “You had to have a Party or Youth League membership to be able to participate. Originally we were told we would go for one or one and a half years.”¹³ “Didn’t people say that there were snakes in Fujian? Everyone was too scared to come. My old man (*laotouzi*, 老头子) was a militiaman and the group leader in the village. Nobody wanted to come, so he went to Fujian himself.”¹⁴ All of the workers mentioned that the workers who came in the first round, mostly male, were supposed to work in Fujian for only two to three years, but after that they were asked to stay for good. That was also the time when the provincial governments made the arrangement to move the male workers’ wives and

¹⁰ SHM, from Shandong, male

¹¹ CJ, from Shanghai, female

¹² LSZ, from Shanghai, female

¹³ SHM, from shandong, male

¹⁴ XM, from Shandong, female

children to Fujian. A few of the workers felt misled by the provincial governments. However, most did not view the migration and jobs negatively at that time. Decades later, however, they felt greatly disappointed that they and their families were not treated well after the turn-of-the-century privatization of their work units.

Around the same period, the state also mobilized millions of ethnic Han laborers from populous provinces to aid construction in remote ethnic minority areas. Li's research in Xinjiang (2010) and Hansen's study in Gansu and Yunnan (2005) offer insights into these migration programs and the migrants involved in them. From 1953 to 1966, the state mobilized peasants from populous eastern provinces including Shandong, Shanghai, and Zhejiang, as well as technology cadres and intellectual youths from Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Gansu, and sent them to Xinjiang in order to establish agriculture and forestry bases. Li points out that while the state's purpose in developing Xinjiang was to reduce the population pressure on the environment and employment opportunities in the inner Chinese provinces, most migrants were motivated by the prospect of better livelihoods. Hansen studied Han migrants in two of China's ethnic minority areas: Xiahe in the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Gansu province and Sipsong Panna in the Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan province. Hansen challenged the abstract understanding of the "Han majority" as a homogenous cultural and social body, and argued that many distinctions between Han migrants could be discerned in terms of time of migration, subjectivity, social class, place of origin, emotional commitment to state projects, and the various ways they related themselves to minority groups. To take an example most relevant to my research from among the Han people who migrated via state-organized projects during the 1950s through the 1970s, the elite group of cadres and educated people understood their resettlement as

an idealistic mission in line with government ideology. Conversely, the majority of settlers who were recruited from poor Han rural areas and became state farm workers in order to escape the extreme poverty in their home villages hardly related their migration to the mission of the state, but rather to their following a personal opportunity for a better life.

Comparing my own research with the studies by Li and Hansen reveals both parallel and different findings regarding the state-directed migration programs in the late 1950s and early 1960s. First, despite the state ideology associated with the programs, individual participants' agendas varied as to whether they were in line with or differed from the state's heroic narrative. Regardless, being uprooted from their hometowns was certainly very hard for all of the migrants, even though some of them voluntarily sought to improve their livelihoods and felt proud of their contributions to the socialist project. Participants' assessments of the state programs diverged according to their differing origins and social positions. Workers' understandings and assessments of their own migratory past were informed by their current situations. For example, all of the older workers I spoke with mentioned that they were only supposed to work in Fujian for one to three years, but ended up in the province for the rest of their lives. Contrary to the majority who simply stated as neutral fact that "we didn't expect to stay here for long," the old logging camp workers used phrases like "the state lied to us" to describe their feelings about the state's migration program. The resentment evidenced in the elderly logging camp workers' words developed through their ten-year petition. The restructuring of enterprises associated with the local logging camps in the late 1990s caused almost all women workers to lose their claim to any retirement pension or welfare. When I spoke with them in 2014, these workers, mostly women, had been continuously petitioning since 1998. In their petition narrative, they emphasize the

state's manipulation of labor migration, arguing that therefore it is the state's responsibility to ensure their support in old age. Their tendency to highlight the manipulation by the state extends into the everyday narrative of the workers, both female and male. Chapter three expands upon their ten-year-long protest and gendered narrative performance.

***Jiashu*: Wifization of Rural Migrant Labor in Socialist China**

Labor recruitment and state-directed migration for the forestry industry in Fujian was gendered in multiple ways, in terms of workers' migration time, roles in productive and reproductive labor, as well as job positions and status. Migrants' places of origin also factored into this gendered process. Workers from Shandong, Zhejiang, and Fujian (more than 90% of all workers) came predominantly from rural areas. In most cases, male workers migrated first, and their wives migrated two or three years later, also under the state's collective mobilization and arrangement. The male workers who migrated first were registered as state workers. After their wives arrived at their work units, these women were assigned jobs and worked as "family dependents" (*jiashu*, 家属) from that point forward. However, workers from Shanghai all came from urban areas and were young and single; and male and female workers migrated together. All of the Shanghai workers, regardless of gender, were assigned jobs and worked as state workers, a case in which urban origin translated into greater long-term job security.

Many people I interviewed, especially first generation workers, called family-dependent workers "family dependents" (*jiashu*). Once when I was chatting with a group of first-generation sawmill family dependent workers, several referred to themselves as *jiashu*. But another worker corrected them saying that "we were 'family-dependent workers' (*jiashu gong*, 家属工). We

became workers afterwards.” And then, other workers agreed, “Oh right, we were ‘workers’ (*gongren*, 工人) too.” The Shunwen Sawmill established its collective enterprise in 1980 and registered all of the family dependent workers into the system, which was the one referred to by the worker who said “we *became* workers afterwards.”¹⁵ However, the logging camps never transferred their family dependent workers into the system, so the logging camp workers all referred to family dependent workers as *jiashu*. But the term does not mean that the workers thought of the family dependent workers as not laboring for and contributing to the logging camps. In fact, logging camp workers, including the male workers and the female family dependent workers, spent ten years pushing the local government to recognize and value the family dependent workers’ labor contribution.¹⁶ In my interviews with family dependent workers, I did not observe obvious differences in their identities and subjectivities between those who called themselves *jiashu* and who called themselves *jiashu gong*. The workers usually used them interchangeably.

The first-generation state workers were predominantly male, with only a few female workers assigned this higher status. The first-generation family dependents, by contrast, were all female. The gender-based stratification in recruitment occurred in all of the forestry units during

¹⁵ State-sponsored neighborhoods or state-enterprises building collective enterprises were common phenomena around 1980. The establishment of a state lumber mill-affiliated collective enterprise was a compromise between the state’s and the lumber mill’s desire for higher productivity and the pressure on mill cadres from employees to hire their children. The collective enterprise hired children of the state lumber mill workers, providing them with lower salaries and benefits than the state workers. When the lumber mill started the collective enterprise, they also registered their dependent workers into the collective enterprise. I explain this history in detail in chapter 4 and analyze how this history led to a protest of the laid-off collective workers, mostly women, in 2013.

¹⁶ See Chapter Three for details.

the period of initial establishment. I use the sawmill and logging camps as examples to illustrate the gendered divisions of labor in the work units. In the logging camps, the state workers took charge of logging, cutting down trees and carrying and transporting logs. The dependent workers were assigned to cut branches, peel the bark off the logs, clear the underbrush and grass, burn the clear cut areas, create the fire breaks, dig holes, plant the new trees, conduct selective logging, nurture the trees, till the soil, and apply fertilizer. One of the dependent workers told me, “If the workers worked on the mountain for one day, we dependents needed to follow them and work in the same spot for three days.” Statements such as this one show that the varied, time-consuming nature of the tasks demanded of the dependent workers.

In the sawmill, the state workers typically labored on assembly lines for eight hours each workday. The dependent workers did not have regular working hours. Most dependents were assigned tasks such as carrying railroad ties to the trains and were therefore needed to work whenever the trains came, even at night or on rainy days. If there were temporary openings on the assembly lines, dependents would be asked to fill them on a temporary basis. In both the logging camps and sawmill, the state workers obtained their salaries and ration tickets on a regular monthly basis, while dependents’ income largely depended on how many hours they worked or how many pieces they finished. For example Laoniang, a sawmill dependent worker whose life story I explore in greater detail later in this chapter, broke down the workers’ income to me:

Each worker (*gongren*, 工人) earned 45 jin [22.5 kg] of rice per month; family dependent workers (*jiashu*, 家属工) earned 23 jin [11.5 kg] every month, and obtained 2 liang stipend on each day of working. The work I did was heavy, other

people (dependents) who did light work had no stipend.¹⁷

The reason men received more rice than women was not only because of the understanding that men did heavy work while women did light work, but also was based on the assumption that a man's rice could be shared with his wife and children; therefore, women workers were presumed to need only temporary employment as a "supplement" or "help" to their husbands. Melissa Brown (2016) suggests that scholarly analyses of the Chinese economy, rural Chinese girls and women themselves, and their families all undervalue women's and girls' economic contributions. These three groups all tend to use "help" or "dutiful help" to describe female labor, which contributes to the view that Chinese women did little work. This discursive phenomenon, Brown holds, has existed since the pre-revolutionary time, and continued through the Maoist and reform periods. In reality, most of the forestry workers' households, particularly those with multiple adolescent children, needed more rice than a man's earnings alone could provide. Hence all women had to work in the logging camps, many of them working every day. None of the women actually had the privilege of skipping workdays when they were assigned by the logging camp cadres to work, never mind the possibility of completely relying on their husbands. This kind of flexibilization of labor made female labor appear to be optional at the level of the logging camp and the household. But in actuality, female labor under these circumstances were crucial for the state industry to cut costs and for families to achieve everyday

¹⁷ 1 jin is equal to 500 g/1.1 pound, and 1 liang is equal to 1/10 jin, that is 50 g. If a woman worked 30 days every month, which was normal, she could earn 29 jin of rice (32 pounds); while her husband could earn 45 jin (50 pounds). Every worker's child could get a stipend of 10 to 18 jin of rice per month (11-20 pounds). Usually this amount was more than enough for a young child, but not enough for an adolescent. Therefore, women in households with multiple adolescent children often needed to work the longest hours.

survival. Women dependent workers had to work; and most of the time, their work hours exceeded those of the men, as men had fixed monthly income and thus were not incentivized to work additional hours to make ends meet. This group of women workers, who were excluded by the discourse of a presumed male “breadwinner,” were in fact the very people who had to work more in order to win the bread for themselves and children. Studying international capital’s rediscovery of Third World women since the 1970s, Maria Mies points out that women in Third World countries are increasingly becoming “de facto breadwinners” (2014, 119). But this reality has not changed the fact that they are defined, ideologically and institutionally, as dependents of their “breadwinner” husbands. This theorization applies to the forestry workers in my research as well.

When I asked the workers why positions were assigned in this way, they told me that men are stronger and thus they could do heavier jobs, while women have less physical strength and could only do light jobs. However, when I asked the sawmill workers to tell me the details of their jobs, I found this line of reasoning to be insufficiently supported by actual practices of labor distribution. For instance, consider the sawmill’s first main product, railway ties, as a case in point. After trucks shipped logs from the logging camps, male SOE workers would transport the logs to the shop floors with their bodies and cranes, after which male and female SOE workers processed them into scaled railway ties. In the end, female family dependent workers carried the ties on their shoulders to cars and trains to ship them to their destinations. “We dependents worked, while the workers were working; when they left work, we still kept working, carrying ties.” Laoniang recalled. “We needed to carry the railway ties and put them into the train cars.” The dependent workers used a thick board to bridge the ground and the top of the train cars—one

end resting on the ground, while the other lay on the top of the car. They called the board a “bridge board” (*qiaoban*, 桥板). Laoniang reported feeling nervous for her safety while carrying ties, especially in bad weather, “The bridge board went so high, as high as a one-story building. Two of us carried a tie that weighed over a hundred jin. Poor us, had to do that. Two women used their shoulders to carry a heavy tie while walking on a narrow board. We were so scared. Often when it’s rainy, the ties got wet, and when we tried to throw them into the car, they got stuck on our shoulders and wouldn’t move off.” Carrying the ties was definitely heavy and dangerous work, and since there was no motorized assistance, it required the family dependent workers’ physical strength. These so-called “light jobs” were arguably among the heaviest job assignments in the sawmill.

After the sawmill extended its production line and started producing plywood and fiberboard in the 1970s, the plywood shop floor, due to the amount of manual work required for plywood production (such as moving boards by hand), hired mainly female workers. The fiberboard shop, by contrast, mostly recruited male workers, as this production line needed more machinery work. All of the electricians and repairmen in the various shop floors were male. Meanwhile, when there were any short-term openings for manual work positions in any shop floor, family dependent workers would temporarily fill them. This phenomenon of men being assigned machine work while women worked with their own bodies was derived from a socially constructed gendered understanding of human physical and intellectual abilities—namely that men possess higher technological aptitude, while women are more patient, careful, and have “nimble fingers” to directly work on materials. It also inter-relates to how men’s and women’s working space and time were stratified. State workers’ jobs were permanent and regular while

dependents' jobs were temporary and flexible; and state workers worked indoors while dependents worked outdoors. In short, rural female laborers were recruited to do flexible, manual, lower-paid, less-respectable, and outdoor work. The dominant discourse in post-1976 China described all employment at state industries as "iron rice bowls" jobs, that is to say they were all permanent full-time jobs with fixed incomes and secured benefits. This discourse also assumed all workers at the state sector to be spoiled and thus lacking productivity. The labor narratives told to me by women dependent workers in Fujian forestry challenged this "iron rice bowl" discourse of "spoiled workers."

Scholars have observed and criticized the gendered understanding of physical capacities and skills, gendered arrangement of job positions, and flexibility of women's work in rural cooperatives and urban factories across various socio-political periods in Chinese history (Croll 1983, Davin 1979, Wolf 1985). Since the 1950s, many rural cooperatives and mutual aid teams used women as seasonal and on-demand labor, assigning them to do "lighter" jobs that earned fewer work points than men's labor. When women had to do work at home, their activities were merely seen as "dutiful help," rather than work (Brown 2016). In the villages, only agricultural work was counted as rural production, while other production activities, such as handicrafts, were considered "backward" and not awarded work points (Eyferth 2009, 2012). In an effort to increase women's employment rates in cities and towns, many neighborhood collective enterprises were built in the late 1970s and 1980s, either to produce primary materials or to process the byproducts of state enterprises. These jobs were considered "less-skilled" and were very unstable. From education to employment, men still occupied a much greater proportion of careers and positions requiring technical training or use of machines. The state economy and

household survival in the Maoist China both took advantage of and exploited rural women's cheaper labor.

In Wen Tiejun's (2000) post-socialist analysis of Chinese socialist economics, he argues that China, being unable to plunder foreign resources through colonialism in the same way as the West, instead accumulated primary capital internally from agricultural surplus during the Maoist era. Wen named this process of institutionally transferring rural surplus to the urban sphere for industrialization "State Capitalist Primitive Accumulation." The institutions crucial to this process included the commune system, state-controlled purchasing and marketing, the rationing of grain, and the dual household registration system, which kept rural residents firmly in the countryside (Day 2013). During the period of post-socialist marketization and privatization, particularly the second phase of the reform era, which began around 1992, the rural sphere again subsidized the urban development. For example, when China went through SOE reform in the late 1990s, in order to prevent social unrest in the cities, the state kept grain prices low and enforced grain planting in the countryside (Keidel 2008). During the recent economic downturn in 2009, we once again saw policies designed to protect urban development through exploitation of the rural economy and peasants. Yan Hairong's research on Chinese female rural migrant workers since economic reform began in the 1970s explores the gendered nature of policies that defined the rural surplus labor, particularly female labor, as a "reserve army of labor," in Marx's term, for urban China (Marx and Engels 1965, Yan 2008).

Some female forestry workers' experiences of *xiafang* (下放) —the Chinese characters literally mean sent down, but during the early 1960s this word generally meant to lose a job— supports this analysis by Wei and others that the countryside was used to supply a flexible labor

force for urban spaces and to absorb cities' surplus population—in ways that were particularly gendered. In the last two years of the 1950s, a great number of male and female peasants were recruited to work in urban factories during the Great Leap Forward campaign (1958-1960). Some of my female interviewees were recruited to work in urban factories during that time. They told me that when after 1960, the factories' yield “couldn't catch up,” many workers were sent down. These *xiafang* workers were mostly female because “the factory labor force was male, while we were a dependent labor force and less strong than them, so were laid off and sent back to our home villages.” When the national production plan needed more labor force, men and women were both recruited from rural areas. However, when the national plan failed and decided to get rid of some extra labor force, rural women were the first to go. In fact, this same principle was applied at the turn-of-the-century enterprise privatization, with some first-generation workers using the exact same phrase of “*xiafang*” to describe their children's *xiagang* (lay-offs). The first-generation workers' “misuse” of these two terms reflects their understanding of the similarity and continuity of these two state-initiated plans. These two nation-wide plans all laid off surplus labor when the urban economy required a structural adjustment and cheaper labor supply. Although these two terms both appear to be gender-neutral or gender-blind, these two projects caused more unemployment for women than for men. After the privatization of state enterprises and layoffs of state workers (*xiagang*) around 2000, permanent state workers became contract workers without benefits; in the meantime, cheaper rural migrant labor forces were used as a replacement. *Xiafang* shared a lot of same phenomena and results with *xiagang*, which can be shown from the following two women workers' stories.

Two women told me they were recruited as state workers at the end of 1950s. After being

laid off in the early 1960s and then subsequently reemployed, however, they were then seen as the wives/dependents of their state worker husbands, and thus worked as dependents thereafter. In contrast to the wifization of these women workers, widows never experienced being laid off and they worked as state workers throughout their tenure. The rationale for differentiating between state workers and dependent workers, was based on the assumption that men were the family breadwinners, and thus women in households with men were present were defined as wives/dependents/supplementary income earners. When there was no man in the household, the widow was considered the breadwinner, and thus deserved support from the state that matched the amount other male state workers received. The Maoist state used this redistribution and labor recruitment system, which considered the heterosexual family as the basic unit, to support and manage the citizens/laborers in the urban China.

In her analysis of how patriarchy has assisted capital accumulation globally since the height of 19th century European colonialism, Maria Mies (1986, 2014) coined the term “housewifization” to describe how the image of an ideal domesticated woman consumer who depended on a male “breadwinner” was generalized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While colonizers prohibited slave women in the Caribbean to marry or to have children (as it was cheaper to import slaves than to pay for the reproduction of slave labor), they domesticated their “own” women into pure breeders for the purpose of uplifting race and nation by excluding them from engaging in work outside the home or owning property (Reddock 1984). The domestication and privatization of women extended from the bourgeoisie class proper, to petty-bourgeoise, and finally to the working class or the proletariat, during the expansion of colonialism and imperialism. Capitalism did not, as Engels and Marx believed, destroy the family; instead, it

created family with the help of the state and by defining “housewife” as a social category. When international capital rediscovered “Third World” women as a labor force in the 1970s, Mies holds, it universalized the housewife ideology and the model of the nuclear family as signs of modernization so as to define women’s income as supplementary to their husbands—the “breadwinners” and “wage-workers.” This economic logic of housewifization led to a significant reduction of female labor costs. Mies further points out that housewifization “is not an accidental side-effect of the new IDL (International Division of Labor), but a necessary precondition for its smooth functioning” (2014, 120).

There are parallel findings between my investigation of forestry women dependent workers in Maoist China and Mies’ examination of “housewifization” through two hundred years of colonial and capitalist history. Women in marriage were essentially defined as wives of their husbands in the economy, institutionally and ideologically, and therefore offered less compensation for their labor, which was not considered to be crucial to the household survival. Moreover, the state policies reinforced these processes. However, our studies also diverge in many ways that demand attention to socio-historical context across capitalism and socialism. First of all, the Maoist policies did not create housework or the housewife as a crucial agent of consumption, which was a very important phenomenon in capitalist societies. Second, the Chinese socialist state controlled labor recruitment and resource redistribution in urban China mostly through state enterprises and households, not the market, and the female-headed households equally enjoyed the welfare. Third, forestry women workers were not “domesticated” and privatized in terms of their labor activities. Therefore, I do not use Mies’ concept of “housewifization” to describe my subjects, but “wifization.” The phenomenon of defining

women as supplementary income and cheaper labor continues in post-socialist China. In fact, the characteristics of this phenomenon in post-socialist China have come to more closely resemble what Mies discusses regarding the discursive housewifization of Third World women; hence, a convergence of neo-colonialism and post-socialism, in terms of the mechanism of taking advantage of female labor. To elaborate on the continuity of “wifization” in the post-socialist China, I contextualize below the privatization and domestication of women workers in the reform of Fujian’s forestry industry.

From Corporatizing the State Industry to Full-Scale Privatization, 1980s-early 2000s

The state forestry industry in Fujian underwent several rounds of restructuring shifts from the 1980s to the 2000s, which first turned state-owned production and reproduction units into corporate-style enterprises, before finally changing them into completely privatized companies. Along with changes in ownership and management, these enterprises experienced a gradual transformation of their employees’ labor organization.¹⁸ These changes were subject to geographical and industrial variations. With state protection (including governmental control of supplies and raw materials prices) the state forestry industry in Shunwen enjoyed multiple advantages under the planned economy (1950s-1980s). During this period the central government considered wood (along with concrete and steel) a crucial state-owned resource and therefore controlled its production, transportation, sale, and use. Before 1985, all timber had to

¹⁸ The China Labor Bulletin published an online article that summarized the three stages of nation-wide state enterprise restructuring from 1978 to post-1992, <http://www.clb.org.hk/en/content/reform-state-owned-enterprises-china>. Lu Ding compared the trend of Chinese economic reform before and after 1992 in their article “China’s Institution Development for a Market Economy since Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Nanxun.”

be sold, processed, and resold through the state-owned sawmills in southern China. It was illegal for other organizations or individuals to sell timber or wood products. The Shunwen Sawmill obtained most of its timber from state-owned logging camps (as well as some from the villages in and around the Shunwen county) at a price kept relatively low due to government control. One of the Shunwen Sawmill's functions was to store the timber and ship it elsewhere through its railway connection, particularly in the 1960s and 70s. The sawmill also processed timber and then sold wood products, including various kinds of ties and boards, to other, mostly state-owned factories at a profit until the 1980s.¹⁹ At that time, Shunwen Sawmill was directly managed by the Fujian Provincial Government and Fujian Provincial Forestry Department. Most of its revenue was turned over to the provincial government. Moreover, the process of turning trees into wood products was subject to anywhere from fourteen to seventeen different taxes, ranging from agricultural and industrial taxes to consumption taxes. While the state forestry units enjoyed many state-supported privileges, they also brought a lot of revenue to the state.

Beginning in the 1980s and informed by China's nationwide economic reform, the southern forestry industry restructured in multiple ways including enterprise management, control of market sales, and labor relations. The Chinese central and provincial governments' efforts to limit the scale of state-owned factories and decrease the cost of workers' salaries and benefits started in the early 1980s. At this time, various forestry units in Shunwen established their own collective-owned enterprises, which was one result of the Fujian government's policy of downscaling state-owned enterprises. The collective-owned enterprise workers were mostly

¹⁹ The major products include railroad ties, beer crates, plywood, plywood concrete forms, plywood furniture planks, and skateboard decks (mostly provided for Taiwanese and Hong Kong businesses).

daughters of the first-generation workers and/or wives of the second-generation state workers. The collective enterprise workers had lower salaries and benefits than their state enterprise counterparts.²⁰ After 1985, the wood market in southern China was gradually opened. The villages as collectives were allowed to sell timber. In the beginning, they were only allowed to sell thin timber with a diameter under 16 centimeters. By the early 1990s the villages could legally sell all kinds of timber, and were also allowed to process and sell lumber. But as the Shunwen Sawmill had a much larger capacity for storage, production, and shipping, they still occupied most of the market during the beginning of the reforms. And the villages still sold most of their timber to the Shunwen Sawmill. A belief that rose in popularity in the late 1980s was that the SOEs enjoyed the superiority of “eating out of the big pot rice” for so long that they had become spoiled and thus lacked productivity and competitive advantage in the newly opened market. This discourse argued that in order to adapt to and survive in the new market as well as create incentives, enterprises need to reform their methods of management. All of the Shunwen’s forestry units conducted some type of reform to increase their productivity. In the early 1990s, the Shunwen Sawmill started running its various workshops like separate companies through the establishment of responsibility systems. In the beginning of each year, different workshop managers were asked to make sales and production plans. The sawmill took a certain amount of revenue from each workshop, while the workshops kept part of their income; moreover, if they over-achieved their goals, they could keep the surplus income. The workshops in turn managed their employees in this way, giving the workers regular salaries plus revenue-related bonuses.

²⁰ Chapter Four will use the Shunwen Sawmill as an example to elaborate this change and discuss how this change led to different effects on the second-generation men and women workers before, during, and after the enterprise privatization around 2000.

After the mid-1990s, all of the workers' salaries were based on the number of pieces they had processed. Additionally, Shunwen Sawmill management started encouraging workers to take early retirement or quit because they did not want to pay worker pensions. The logging camps underwent a similar transformation. Meanwhile, as the first-generation family dependent workers had retired in the early 1990s, the logging camps replaced them with contractors who were mostly rural migrant workers from the southwestern Chinese province of Guizhou.²¹ The logging camps hired the workers to perform seasonal logging and planting to avoid the expense of maintaining a permanent labor force. In the 1990s, to further decrease the cost of state workers' benefits, the central, provincial, and city governments implemented several acts to gradually "get rid of the burdens of the state-owned enterprise" (*wei guoqi qu baofu*, 为国企去包袱). Provision for medical care, pension funds, children's education, utilities, and services that had once been provided by the state-owned work units were transferred, one by one, to Shunwen County government or/and later to the private market.

The restructuring of the forestry industry included gradual transformations of labor relations and labor organization. First, it changed the relationship between workers and their industry of employment. Throughout the period of the state forestry industry, the goals of socialist construction encompassed the use of labor not only to further socialist industrialization, but also to provide workers with good material conditions and progressive ideological education. Restructuring shifted understandings about the nature of workers, from valorized socialist citizens to the labor supply for the state economy. Hence new management regimes introduced

²¹ The legal retirement age for women is generally 50 and for men is 60 in China. In the early 1990s, most of the family dependent workers were over 50 years old and retired.

all sorts of means to limit the cost of labor: decreasing workers' salaries and benefits, cutting laborers' welfare programs, and making their tenure increasingly unstable. This process of controlling labor costs started with women, and then extended to all workers. Second, the restructuring changed the perception of "productivity," for both the industries and the workers. Among first-generation workers, the male workers received a stable monthly income, while female workers received variable compensation based on days worked. This gendering of labor organization and work payment made female workers rely on their own self-discipline much more than their male counterparts. In the 1980s, the payment to all workers was feminized in that what had started as a program of stable monthly salaries plus outcome-based bonus income, was later replaced by a system of piece wages. This change not only decreased workers' tenure security, but more importantly, made workers consciously equate their own individualized productivity to their individualized compensation. I always asked the second-generation state workers who worked through the 1980s and 90s about their opinions on the popular critiques about state workers eating out of the big pot rice and being lazy when their payment was stable and monthly. One of them found this criticism ridiculous, "How was that possible? How could we just be lazy and not work? That was our job, and we certainly would take responsibility and complete our tasks." He challenged the dominant idea that outcome-based compensation brought higher productivity, "We worked hard with our full heart until our compensations started being fully based on our work performance. When workers were not mainly concerned about the money, we cared about our work. But when all people worked for more money, we of course only worked when that led to money. That was the time people started being lazy and trying to work less." Before, when workers labored as a collective, their productivity stemmed from the

motivation to contribute to that collective; later, when their productivity was privatized, the labor discipline and the workers' challenge to that discipline both became individual-based.

The step-by-step transformations of the state forestry industry and labor organization ended in full-scale enterprise privatization in the late 1990s, which was part of a national policy. Many of the state-owned enterprises across industries, including forestry, were diagnosed as uncompetitive and not productive in the newly opened market, and thus were directed toward privatization. Popular narratives called this late 1990s policy of full-scale enterprise privatization “one cut of the knife” (*yidaoque*, 一刀切), which resulted in “a complete replacement of employees' identities.” To enact this national policy, different SOEs deployed varying discourses to legitimize this process within their specific industries, and different regions and enterprises had divergent approaches that resulted in varied levels of change to workers' identities. When the Shunwen municipal government announced its decision to fully privatize the state sawmill and reduce the scale of state logging camps, one of the reasons it gave was to protect forest resources. The government asserted that the monopoly of state forestry led to the low efficiency of forestry production, which wasted forest resources; moreover, the scale of the state forestry industry was so large that it demanded too much from the local forest. The government claimed that privatizing and reducing the scale of sawmills and logging camps would not only decrease the impact on forest resources, but also make them more efficient. The privatization of enterprise and employees was also adjusted to different locations and units.

The Shunwen Sawmill was fully privatized. It was divided into four sections and between 1998 and 2001 sold to four private business owners—one from Shunwen, and three from other provinces near Fujian, such as Zhejiang. They then ran different lumber and wood product mills

after privatization. These privately owned mills made use of the former state mills' buildings, two giant chimneys, and six gantry cranes, while most of them put in new machinery imported from Japan and Germany. These machines were thought to work more efficiently and thus upgrade the mills' production lines. In 2013 and 2014, after the privately owned mills moved out from this former state sawmill's address into suburban industrial zones, and when the county government was planning to re-sell the land, the government hired some contractors to demolish the buildings, blow up the chimneys, and cut down the cranes. One day in 2014 some former state workers and I watched the electric welders cutting the crane into pieces. This occasion was when they told me the story of the first-generation workers building the crane with their own bodies. Another day, when I was interviewing a laid-off lumber mill worker in his apartment, we heard a loud explosion. When we both ran to the window and looked out, we saw a giant smoke stack in the place where one of the chimney was once located. The interviewee signed, "They got rid of the chimney. The mill is truly gone." That moment really resembled the film *Piano in a Factory* (2011), directed by Meng Zhang, in which Chinese laid-off steelworkers attempt to keep the two chimneys of the old plant from being demolished, only to fail. Towards the end of the film, the laid-off workers stand together watching the chimneys being exploded.

All of the forestry workers were laid off between 1998 and 2001. The layoffs in this specific time were called *xiagang* (下岗, leaving work positions). The process of laying off workers was called *maiduan* (买断, buying off). "Buying off" captured the fact that the workers received severance pay to leave their jobs which then terminated their claims on the sawmill. The amount of money workers received depended on how many years they had worked for the enterprise. The buying-off fees were not the same for state workers and collective workers, even

though they worked for the exact same duration of time. On average, state workers received around 20,000 yuan, while the collective workers received only 3,000 to 4,000 yuan. The Transportation and Auto Repair Shop treated their workers similarly. Due to the fact that the Transportation and Auto Repair Shop's function depended so much on the planned economy, the city was not able to sell it to private business owners. The assets, mainly trucks, were therefore sold off.

The different logging camps had various ways of demobilizing their workers, depending on the assets that the logging camps owned and managed. Some logging camps, like the Sawmill and Transportation and Auto Repair Shop, gave workers a buying-off fee to terminate their employment. Other logging camps, which held little liquid capital and could not afford to pay the buying-off fee in cash, divided their bamboo forest and other resources among the workers, allowing them to manage the forests on their own. In the above two cases, the city government still fully owned the logging camps. Some logging camps divided no more than 49 percent of their assets into shares and gave these to the workers as their buying-off fee. The workers had effectively lost their jobs, but as stockholders of the logging camps, they could receive a dividend every year if the logging camps generated revenue. In this case, the city government still owned more than 51 percent and retained full decision-making power. Therefore, all of the logging camps remained under the management of the local government and their property rights were not privatized, despite the fact that most of their workers lost their jobs and some continued to serve as managers of a few of the logging camps' assets.

In sum, the reform of the forestry industry in Fujian transformed a state industry that supported both the national economy and the livelihoods of urban workers into one that

prioritizes individualized productivity and the interests of private owners. Although the reform was part of a nationwide policy, it was situated and adapted to the forestry industry in this specific location. The different nature and functions of units in the forestry commodity chain contributed to the variations of reform as well. Socialist China completed urban industrialization, modernization, and “state capitalist primitive accumulation” through institutionally exploiting rural surplus, particularly a feminized “reserve army of labor.” This section shows how reform-era China re-adjusted its economic structure, privatizing the state industries and creating millions more cheap and vulnerable laborers in a similarly gendered way. The primitive capital that had been accumulated in the socialist era was divided by the state and private owners, both of which continue exploiting feminized labor from both rural and urban domains.

“Workers” after the 2000 Reform

Along with the alteration of enterprise ownerships and labor relations, the narrative around “workers” and workers’ everyday experience changed as well. During the reform era the state workers were constructed as “eating out of the big pot rice” and thus “being spoiled and unproductive.” Another discourse predominated during the privatization of state industry, namely that laid-off workers “sacrificed” their stable jobs and lives for a better national economy and more efficient development. This discourse was especially pervasive in China’s northeast, where it targeted the heavy industry workers, who previously signified China’s most-honored socialist working class. State workers were laid off, so the state economy could take advantage of the substitution of bodies of cheaper migrant workers in the urban industrial sector. These intertwined discourses of unproductive socialist labor and sacrifice for the nation worked

together to render state workers as a burden and irrelevant to the commonly regarded “rise” of China as a powerful globalized national economy. The developmentalist technique of sacrificing a group of people for the national development has been utilized in the PRC several times: lowering the prices of crops to sacrifice rural communities for the sake of urban industrial construction, and, in the 2010s, terminating peasant agriculture for the urbanization that is considered China’s future.

As those sacrificed, almost all of the workers from the state forestry units were faced with having to look for jobs after the full-scale privatization of 2000. The logging camp workers who managed bamboo forests or other assets might have had enough income, depending on the market. The logging camp workers who became stockholders of their previous work units certainly soon realized that the logging camps hardly generated any revenue after the early 2000s because of the logging bans in their mountains.²² As a result they needed to find new forms of employment. All of the workers in the Shunwen Sawmill and Transportation and Auto Repair Shop were suddenly pushed into a new job market. When I conducted my pilot research at Shunwen Sawmill in 2008, about twenty-eight percent of the former state workers were working for the four privatized sawmills that were transferred from the former state timber mill. Approximately thirty-three percent of the former state workers worked for other newly established privatized mills. Only about nineteen percent of the collective workers were working for the privatized mills at that time. The government encouraged private mill owners to hire state workers, yet did not sufficiently address the collective workers’ re-employment needs, resulting

²² The second chapter will talk more about forest property right changes that affected the logging camps.

in an uneven distribution of labor. Because most of the state workers were male, and most of the collective workers were female, more former state male workers worked for the privatized mills than female workers. Working for the privately owned mills was considered the best reemployment option among the laid-off workers. The jobs were contracted, full-time, and paid well (around the local average salary). Some of the jobs provided benefits. For example, the mills paid for the workers' medical insurance and social security. The jobs were comparatively stable and long-term, based on skills learned from previous jobs in the state sawmill, and workers felt reasonably secure. But in 2008, many workers at the privatized mills already started complaining about the working conditions. They were asked to work overtime, without being paid overtime salary. The workload was much heavier than at the former state sawmill. The boss and managers did not respect the workers and "treated them as non-humans," in some of my interviewees' words. The privatized mills hired many young rural migrant workers who could work longer and faster. The rural migrant workers were either from villages in and around Shunwen, or from less-affluent provinces near Fujian, such as Jiangxi. The managers then used the young rural migrant workers to threaten the former state workers to work more to avoid being fired. The state workers felt unable to meet the managers' demands, especially as they were getting older. When I revisited the sawmill for a year of fieldwork in 2013, many of the former state workers who worked for the privatized mills had either quit or been fired because of their inability to keep up with the work load, long working hours, or managers' bad treatment.

What jobs did the laid-off workers who were not hired by the privatized mills do, including those logging camp workers who lost their jobs and did not manage forests afterwards? They mostly relied on their family or friendship networks to look for reemployment

opportunities. Seldom did workers find the city-run reemployment assistance programs useful. Because most of the former state workers' families and friends had worked with them in their former work units, it was difficult for them to look for jobs through their networks. In general, more male than female workers were able to find industrial jobs, such as in chemical plants or storage and transportation companies. More female workers were able to find service jobs in restaurants, hotels, supermarkets, etc. Industrial jobs were better paid than service jobs, yet both presented the problem of long hours without overtime pay, no benefits, and delayed salary payments. Both groups of workers encountered competition from young rural migrant workers. In 2013, most of former forestry women workers I met in my fieldwork had quit their formal jobs in the service sector. Women's legal retirement age is 50 years old in China. Women can still work after 50, but they will be able to receive pensions after 50 if they have paid Social Security for over 15 years, which a lot of the former state women workers did. Many women workers told me that they felt they had suffered enough and, being lucky to make it through this suffering (*ao chu tou le*, 熬出头了), they quit their formal jobs as soon as they reached retirement age. They could no longer tolerate constant overtime work and the condescending attitudes of their bosses. Many workers, after they reached their retirement ages, started working in informal sectors; more women than men were found doing informal jobs. For example, they were temporarily and randomly introduced by acquaintances to short-term employment, such as driving trucks to transport often illegal goods, knitting export-oriented sweaters at home, and gluing together accessories at their own homes or home-based workshops. These jobs were very unstable and did not pay much, but they gave workers "more freedom and less managers' bad treatment to bear (*geng ziyou, shao shouqi*, 更自由, 少受气)."

By 2013, the majority of workers at the private sawmills and other wood product workshops were rural migrant workers from Shunwen County's villages, less affluent areas near northern Fujian, and the southwestern provinces of Guizhou and Sichuan. The workers were mostly between 25 and 40 years old, both male and female. Workers younger than 25 and/or those who were single tended to look for factory jobs in large cities. The sawmills did not prefer to hire workers over 40 years of age due to owners' ageist logic that posited that these workers were old and lazy, even though they were still young and productive enough to complete the jobs. In 2014, when I visited several small export-oriented workshops and factories, the owners complained about the difficulties of recruiting young workers—most young rural migrant workers wanted to work in the big cities. Some owners had to hire old workers (i.e. 40 and older), and a few of them hired laid-off workers. But these cases were rare. Furthermore, the gendered division of labor clearly played out on the production line in the sawmills. Though many big sawmills renewed their machines on the production lines after the 2000 privatization, sawmills have continued to be semi-mechanized and semi-manual since the 1970s. In these mills, men operated and repaired machines, while women were mostly assigned to manual labor, including gluing wood pieces together, unfolding or folding wood sheets, and so on. The continuity in the gendering of work positions from the socialist era to the present is easy to observe. However, the income gap between male and female workers increased significantly after privatization. In middle- and large-scale sawmills in 2014, male workers earned between 4,000 to 5,000 yuan every month, while female workers' monthly salaries were only 2,000 to 3,000. When I asked for their rationale of paying men and women differently, the owners and managers of the mills listed two aspects. First, they claimed that men are better at operating

machines and women are better at manual labor, while operating machines is more difficult and deserves more money. Second, they assume that men are the breadwinners of families and therefore need more income than women. This social construction of gendered physical and intellectual capacities is another continuity from Maoist China. Nevertheless, the gendering of work positions and compensation in the Maoist era intersected with workers' status: not all females earned less than males; female dependent workers were paid with a daily salary, while female state workers were paid with monthly salary, the same as male state workers. In the post-socialist era, all of the sawmill employees work on a contract basis, thus gender distinctions have emerged as the major (perhaps only) basis on which to vary positions and compensation.

The state logging camps began hiring young male rural migrant workers (20 to 25 years old) from Guizhou in the early 1990s. They believed that Guizhou workers were more hardworking and more exploitable than state workers. Unlike the state workers who lived in permanent apartments and mostly worked for regular hours, the migrant contractors stayed in temporary sheds made of wood boards and regularly worked over time. The logging camps hired migrant contractors to do seasonal work. In the early 1990s, they were hired to replace the former family dependent workers to plant trees. Gradually they were employed to take over the former state workers' role of logging trees. Only male migrant workers were hired. Many of their wives and children came to Fujian with them, and lived alongside them in the mountainous working areas. The wives spent most of their time taking care of children, cooking and doing other chores for the workers' teams, and sometimes "helping" with husbands' work by cleaning the branches, paving the road, and so forth. These women's work blurred the spatial boundary of domesticity (their own households) and the public (the worker's teams and the logging camps),

and served both productive and reproductive roles. However, their labor was considered as merely “help.” As China has become “the world’s factory” in the post-Mao period, tens of millions of rural migrant women workers are now earning their own wages in urban factories. Brown found that “dutiful help,” as “an affective hook,” still ties women into contributing their independent income to their natal, conjugal, or husband’s extended families (2016). Unlike Brown’s subjects, who are mostly factory workers, the wives of Guizhounese logging camp workers do not perform wage labor or have independent income. They have to rely on their husbands for income, as their work is not recognized or paid. Their labor is much more domesticated and privatized than the former dependent workers of the state logging camps. The nature of their roles has moved away from the concept of “wifization,” that I use to describe the labor of women workers in the state forestry industry, to Mies-defined “housewifization” (1986, 2014). But the wives of the male forestry workers do unpaid industrial work and don’t play a significant role in creating consumption.

The Continuities and Discontinuities of Gendered Division of Labor in Post-Socialist China

In the late 1970s, when the Chinese government started allowing western scholars to conduct research in China, several western feminist scholars arrived, eager to witness and document the outcomes of Maoist gender-related projects. Margery Wolf (1985) was upset by her findings of gender inequality in the domains of education, employment in both cities and the countryside, and domestic relations in rural and urban areas in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Delia Davin (1979), whose research focused on the archive from the 1950s, noticed significant local variations in the implementation of the central government’s gender policies. For example,

when Chinese villages cadres encouraged housewives to work outside the home, some of them took advantage of women's cheaper and more flexible labor, while only a few made an effort to ensure women enjoyed equal work status and work point earnings with men, and shut down men who thought of women's jobs as lighter and deserving of fewer rewards.²³ Davin also noticed a backlash against women's employment from Chinese society at large, including various waves of the "women going home" debate, as well as state feminist activists' determined resistance against this backlash. Elizabeth Croll (1983) summarized the strategies, progress, and shortcomings of the state-initiated projects for gender equality in the first thirty years of the PRC. She pointed out that the Chinese government's emphasis on removing the ideological constraints of women's supposed inferiority and traditional patterns of gender division of labor was an important move towards gender equality, but it also led to a neglect of certain material practices that preserved discriminatory beliefs against women. The policies attempting to raise consciousness would not work, from Croll's perspective, without a concrete reallocation of material resources and reorganization of relations of production and reproduction.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, feminist scholars of China have shifted the focus of criticism to the question of how the emergence of global capitalism, the authoritarian

²³ The People's Commune system was established during the Great Leap Forward campaign and functioned as the highest administrative level in rural China from 1958 to 1983. Chinese peasants were organized into small production teams, and teams into brigades, and brigades into communes. Members of each production team worked together and gained work points according to their work hours in the end of each day. At the end of the year, each individual peasants would get their payment, both in kind and in cash, based on the annual accumulation of their work points as well as the total production outcome of their production team. Therefore, the peasants were supposed to obtain similar amount of work points and annual rewards. However, feminist scholars found widespread gender inequality in how many work points men and women gained.

state, and family patriarchy together oppress Chinese women, not only rural migrant women workers but also female urban, middle-class office workers in post-socialist China (Jacka 2005, Pun 2005, Yan 2008). The discussion of gender-related practices in socialist China has been conversely silent. The cessation of discussion of gender (in)equalities and the forgetting of the earlier wave of feminist critique of socialist practices of gendering labor have created an epistemic falseness that the material conditions of gender unfairness and economic oppression emerged during the reform period and are only associated with capitalism. This abandonment of scholarly attention to China's socialist practice of gender equality programs is problematic, as it limits our analysis of the roots of material and ideological discrimination against women after economic reform. In recent years, Wang Zheng, Song Shaopeng, Huang Ping, Huang Xin, and authors of several doctoral dissertations have started to look back to the "Maoist gender project," in Huang Xin's words (forthcoming), to theorize its heritage, to understand today's China, and to refresh feminist debates and activism.

This chapter of my dissertation responds to and contributes to this discussion by offering detailed documentation of the gendered divisions of labor in forestry work units in Fujian, from the state-directed migration, to privileged state enterprises, to privatized factories. To summarize, in the early establishment of state forestry, the socialist state differentiated its labor force based on the intersection of workers' gender, marital status, and rural or urban origin. Married rural women migrants were called "family dependents" and utilized as temporary, flexible, mostly outdoor labor. This exploitation might invoke parallels as to how capitalist factories utilize cheap female labor, which has been discussed in feminist scholarship on the new international division of labor since the 1970s (Elson and Pearson 1981, Mies 1986, Safa 1981 and 1995). But it is

noteworthy that the Chinese socialist state provided their welfare through workers' families as units. Both male and female workers felt secure that they and their family members would be protected in all kinds of aspects by state work units throughout their lives. This kind of state patriarchal welfare supply was very different from the context of the new international division of labor.

Moreover, when discussing women's employment, the concern over the double burden of working primarily at home and outside is often at stake. Communist China's interpretation of Marxist and Leninist thoughts claimed that releasing women from domestic labor is the only means to emancipate women. They claimed that bringing women into public employment could liberate women. However, many scholars have observed women carrying the dual burden of domestic and outside paid labor in socialist China, including the aforementioned earlier wave of feminist critiques. Domestic labor arrangements are not the focus of my research, so I spent little time interviewing and recording how male and female workers shared their responsibilities of labor and care at home. But I did often briefly mention this topic, mostly when I was talking about the frequent demands of "family dependent workers" to work at irregular hours. Because family dependent workers often needed to work in response to seasonal or sudden requirements, they were less available to cook every meal or to do routine chores at home, unlike state workers who worked at regular times. Therefore, the responsibilities of performing household chores and childcare duties had to be shared by both man and woman in a family that was composed of a state worker and a family dependent. And, in a family that had two state workers, it was even clearer that the man and woman both considered fairness in their domestic labor sharing important. Although the "double burden" oppressed a lot of Chinese women in many rural and

urban places in the socialist era, my interviews with two generations of forestry workers in Fujian offered a local and industrial variety where women's waged employment decreased the amount of their domestic labor. The socialization of reproductive labor in these state forestry units relieved women of domestic labor to a large extent. However, this change converted women's labor into flexible and temporary labor that was exploitable for the state economy.

In the early years of reform, when the state attempted different methods of cutting the budget for workers' welfare and benefits, the state enterprises categorized women's labor as cheaper and less protected through using women as collective enterprise workers. At that time, all salaries were low and many couples consisted of both a state worker and a collective worker, so it was an insignificant problem for women to make a slightly lower income, as long as they remained with their families. But ideologically, collective workers were considered "second-class citizens," which had economic as well as ideological repercussions during and after the reform. As most of the collective workers were female, the early years of reform started witnessing a resurgence of attitudes toward female labor as less important and less skilled, resulting in lower pay and fewer state welfare benefits for women. I elaborate upon this process in the fourth chapter and follow the women collective workers' responses to this gendered institutional discrimination. When the reform entered the stage of full-scale privatization, all of the state workers who had previously been entitled to state welfare supplies were laid off. After that, China witnessed multiple ways of making categories of laborers cheap, flexible, and precarious. In privately owned forestry production, men are seen as hardworking, capable, and breadwinning. While comparatively higher paid, they are not protected labor. Women are primarily considered domestic labor, and thus less skilled and less qualified. They are

consequently paid less in the outside labor market.

My study of Fujian forestry shows the continuities and discontinuities of labor divisions in socialist and post-socialist China. The socialist rhetoric that laborers own the state and manage the state enterprises made the workers entitled to not only wages but also social welfare. Their labor contribution, in the workers' minds, made them deserve the state's support to their families' decent living. This rhetoric was disrupted in the reform era, and the "buying-off fee" paid to the laid-off workers was a materialized symbol to the end of their entitlement. After that, labor and laboring bodies became regular commercial goods on a "free market." No ownership of the objects of their labor or affective link between the workers and the state exists today. The discontinuation of material and emotional support for workers' families, the emerging precariousness of retired and laid-off workers' lives, and ideological disruption all resulted in workers' feeling betrayed by the nation-state. These "structures of feeling" fueled the workers' collective actions that I address in the chapters of Part II. Despite the gender-neutral narrative of the urban state workers having "iron rice bowl" security during the socialist era, women workers who had migrated from rural China were mobilized into waged work, becoming a lower-paid, temporary labor force. This exploitation of rural female labor continued through the reform era. The institutionalized intersectional discrimination against women and rurality rendered this population a vulnerable labor supply for China's development projects, namely industrialization and urbanization, throughout the socialist and post-socialist periods.

Gendered Landscape of Forests and Forestry Labor from Socialism to Neoliberalism

When the northern peasants first came to the mountainous area in Southern China, the

natural environment and the working environment were both unfamiliar to them. They were uprooted from their native environment and designated by the state as the proper labor force to transform a foreign landscape. As part of the socialist modernization project, they changed the species of the forests by logging and replanting, seeing the forests as the raw materials of industrialization and urbanization. These workers' bodies—rural bodies—were also the raw materials for this national development project, or in Wen Tiejun's words "state capitalist primitive accumulation." Male workers carried logs and built up the crane with their bodies, female lumber mill workers carried extremely heavy wooden railway ties with their bodies, and female logging camp workers often encountered hornets or got poisoned from eating fungus. As workers recalled, "Shandong would give Fujian people, while Fujian gave Shandong wood," the state-directed migration project was a redistribution of raw materials for the state development project. Moreover, the migration of rural female bodies and the bodily pain the women workers experienced during and after the work were overlooked by the dominant narrative; instead, the official documents recorded their work as a benefit that the state gave to the male workers as a way to "take care of the male workers' families, so they could better focus on their jobs." In contrast with the official narrative, the female dependent workers clearly pointed out the value of their jobs. Although their work of planting and nurturing trees had not immediately created profits for the logging camps, the harvest of the trees decades later constituted their contribution to the local and national economy as well as the development of the forests. Their work, as a type of reproductive labor for the forests, was devalued. Furthermore, official discourse interpreted the Shunwen Lumber Mill's establishment of a collective enterprise as a way to make use of surplus labor (the daughters of male state workers) and the byproducts and waste of the state

enterprise's production. This discourse constructed an analogy between human bodies and trees, rendering female labor exploitable in ways similar to the byproduct and waste of the state enterprise's production line. This socialist discourse of family wages and the incorporation of female labor into a public labor sphere disguised an intersectional discrimination against women and rurality, even as it simultaneously disguised a taken-for-granted exploitation of natural resources (Shapiro 2001).

In reform-era China, the labor of state forestry workers was re-defined as the force behind excessive deforestation, inefficient use of wood products, and endangerment of the natural environment. The reform-era discourse asserted that privatizing the state forestry industry and laying off the "lazy" state workers would increase the efficiency of use of forest resources and thus better protect the natural environment. However, forestry privatization did not develop in the way the state government had anticipated. Taking Shunwen as an example, after four private businesses respectively purchased four workshops from the state sawmill around 2000, each of them enlarged the scale of their operations. The biggest one, Wang Bin Wood Product Company, became much bigger than the former state sawmill, in terms of production, sales revenue, use of raw materials, and number of employees (over 4,000 people at its highest). The increase of scale of the Wang Bin Wood Product Company was largely supported by the Shunwen government through tax waivers, low-priced land sales, bank loans, and other legal or illegal subsidies. Wang Bin mostly produced wooden frames for photos, paintings, and mirrors, for which they needed Chinese fir as the primary raw material. After 2002, property rights for forest resources were privatized and the peasants held the right to plant and log trees under some legal regulations. Because Wang Bin offered good prices for Chinese fir, a lot of peasants logged

the trees that were originally planted on their land in order to plant Chinese fir. They also tended to log the young Chinese firs once they reached regulation size. Shunwen residents, including peasants, urban residents, and forestry bureau employees, all admitted that the diversity (number of species) of forests in Shunwen largely decreased after 2000. Many middle-aged people recalled that when they were children, the mountains were filled with many more diverse species of plants. “The mountains were much more colorful. They were red, yellow, brown, etc., all kinds of colors. But now the mountains are either bald or simply green. As the people are only planting fir and pine trees.” In addition to Wang Bin and other several large- and mid-sized sawmills (each with over 1,000 employees), Shunwen had many small wood production factories and workshops. All of them demanded resources from the local Shunwen forests. In recent years, the businesses realized the limit of the resources in Shunwen and started purchasing timber and lumber from nearby places. Wang Bin and another company named Dushi, which mainly produced for IKEA (a multinational group of companies selling furniture), also imported a lot of raw materials, including timber and lumber, from Southeast Asia, Russia and Switzerland. Robbins and Harrell (2014) reported that the recent forestry policies in China have led to an increasing demand for imports of timber and forest products from vulnerable forests in Russia, Southeast Asia and Africa. I thus argue that the neoliberal discourse of “efficiency” and global environmentalism regarding deforestation continue to obscure the intersectional exploitation of women, rurality, and the trees and forests.

Chapter II: Forestry Danwei in Transition: Contesting Space and Invisible Bodies

To understand the forestry workers' life experience, shifting subjectivity, and collective action, a spatial analysis in articulation with a historical account of changing forestry policy is crucial. The establishment of state forestry in the 1950s and 1960s not only shaped the living space of the state workers who migrated as part of "aid the frontier" project, but also the local Shunwen residents, including peasants. In conversation with the literature of Chinese *danwei* (单位, work unit) studies, this chapter traces the spatial transformation of the lumber mill and logging camps. They were most privileged work units in urban and rural Shunwen, signifying the socialist modernization and advanced industrial production. However, in the post-socialist era, they were abandoned and diagnosed to be impossible to transform into modernity. The laboring bodies living within such spaces therefore became invisible. This spatial transformation is not only a result of some national public policies enacted by the local government, but also reinforced or contested by the workers, their families, and the residents and villagers living around them. The interaction between the workers and neighboring residents and peasants offers a useful lens to analyze these spatial, social, and political transformations. When the state swayed between developmentalist policies and environmentalist discourse, the villagers and logging camp workers were pitted against each other through different periods. Their interactions played out in the form of conflicts, negotiations, and contested agreements across time. In contrast to the former state workers, the new generation of rural migrant workers in the 1990s and post-2000s did not inherit a protected *danwei* space and could not secure a stable living space for themselves

and their families. The ethnographic stories in this chapter aim to demonstrate the changing value and power attached to the space of forestry industry and forests, the sites of production and reproduction of workers and trees.

***Danwei*: The Most Basic Unit of Urban Life in Socialist China**

Many researchers have examined the *danwei*, an urban socio-spatial organization in socialist China, exploring its historical roots in pre-socialist China, its operations and significance in the socialist China, and its reform and legacies through the reform era. The migration history of forestry workers and the geographical location of forestry production all make forestry work units a unique lens for us to rethink the changing meanings of *danwei*. After a review of *danwei* literature, I examine the spatial transformation of lumber mill *danwei* and logging camp *danwei* respectively. *Danwei* emerged and became the major basic unit of social, economic, and political life for Chinese urban residents following the late 1950s (Bray 2005, 94).²⁴ Each *danwei* was a fully serviced production-based residential community. The design of *danwei* was influenced by the Soviet socialist planning ideal of creating a communal living environment that combines everyday life and collective labor to increase productivity and forge proletarian social relationships and collective consciousness (Bray 2005, 93; 124; 150). Inheriting the form of traditional Confucian households' walled housing structure, a typical work unit encloses workplace, residence and social facilities—both productive and reproductive units

²⁴ According to official statistics released by the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China (国家统计局) in 1994 (as cited in Bray 2005), 61.7 percent of the workforce belonged to "state-owned" *danwei*, while 29.3 percent belonged to "collective-owned" *danwei*. The remainder of the population were either "individual laborers" (3.1 percent) or unemployed (5.9 percent).

in one or several walled compound(s) (Lu 2006, 47).

Centered on its productive function (most commonly, an industrial factory), a *danwei* also funded and managed the welfare system, which provided workers and their families housing, medical expenses, disability pensions, funeral costs, and financial support for the families of workers killed in the workplace, retirement pensions, and, after 1951, maternity leave (Bray 2005, 104). Moreover, a *danwei* funded and constructed the necessary infrastructures for its factory area, the attached residential estate/living quarters, and workers' welfare needs. (Bray 2005, 142; Cao Hongtao and Chu Chuanheng 1990, 52-54; Lu and Perry 1997b; Dutton 1998). For example, when I grew up in the Shunwen Lumber Mill in the late 1980s and 1990s, this *danwei* had built and maintained its own employee housing, public utilities—including electrical station and lines, telephone lines, water tower, and water and sewage pipes—public bath, clinic, assembly hall/theater, railway lines, and roads. It also had its own daycare, preschool, and K-12 school, which were established in the late 1960s. Urban work units with their provision of employment, housing, and welfare were effectively became self-sufficient communities, where workers and their families hardly needed to go outside of the *danwei* to fulfill their daily life needs. People have used the phrase “strips and chunks structure” to describe the separations of cities and work units in Chinese urbanism, which was “more as a collection of self-contained and spatially defined communities than as an integrated urban network” (Bray 2005, 124; 155). A *danwei* was not only materially self-sufficient, but also had its own internal social and emotional mechanism to sustain its stability. A former female cadre of the lumber mill, Zhuang—whose life story will be explored in the third chapter—told me that she often needed to talk with the workers and their family members to mediate family conflicts. She saw preventing couples’

divorce as one of her work responsibilities. Danwei cadres played the roles of monitoring people's daily lives, resolving conflicts, and keeping households stable. The workers also often reached out to the cadres to solve their family problems. For example, when a couple got into a fight, one of the two, usually the woman, would go to see the cadres to ask them to intervene. Also as I will elaborate more in the third chapter, my grandmother sobbed and told about her sufferings in front of the *danwei* cadres as she tried to secure material support for her family. As the forestry workers told me, "each *danwei* is a small society." This is one of the important reasons why the workers felt especially upset and found it hard to adjust to the transition when the state enterprise was privatized and the *danwei* went away.

In general, the state-owned *danwei* were better funded and therefore provided a higher standard of facilities and services for their workers and residents than what the city offered for the remainder of the population (Bray 2005, 143; Yang 1994, 249-58; Perry 1997, 42-59). This economic system that treated people differently was a reflection of the ideological system that placed people into hierarchical categories with different identities. While the urban-rural division created institutional hierarchy that provided better material support and more valuable identities for urban residents, there were differentiations among the urban residents as well. In his study of *danwei*, Bray argues that "under socialism, identity was articulated in terms of class rather than through native place or lineage ties; thus it was the act of labor itself that determined subject identity" (2005, 122). I agree with Bray that the native place and lineage ties became less significant in the group identity formation in urban China, but I did observe how people formed networks based on their different native places and lineage ties within a *danwei* as well. Furthermore, what articulated urban people's identity was less their class than their *danwei*. The

residential segregation in the Chinese city was most commonly constructed through the separation of different *danwei* in the form of walled compounds, rather than through economic status or ethnic identities. (Lu 2006, 70)

The reflection of the separation in my research was expressed through the childhood stories of the second-generation male lumber mill workers who grew up in the 1960s and 70s. “We were really bad kids at that time, always bullying the kids across the river,” one of the second-generation male workers told me. The state lumber mill was one of the best *danwei* in town. It was built by the river, and across the river lived the local Shunwen residents, most of them belonging to city-run collectively owned *danwei* or outside the *danwei* system altogether. [See Figure 5] The different identities based on different *danwei* status, in addition to the fact that the lumber mill workers were not from the local area and had no ties with local people, made the separation between the lumber mill and Shunwen city very obvious. Because of material scarcity, local Shunwen kids were often asked by their parents to come to the lumber mill to pick wood waste as fuel for the stoves. The lumber mill workers’ kids also picked up wood waste for their stoves at home, but they claimed the wood waste belonged to the lumber mill and could not be accessed by other people, such as the Shunwen residents. Some of them beat Shunwen kids who came across the river to pick up wood waste, unless “they had good relationship with us, or if they were pretty girls,” a male lumber mill worker told me. In the late 1960s, when some lumber mill kids were sent to Shunwen to go to school, the Shunwen kids found all kinds of chances to “teach them a lesson” as revenge.

This funny childhood story of some currently 60-year-old men reflects two facets of *danwei*. First of all, the production materials were used by the *danwei* employees’ families as

supplies of reproductive life. Although there was a clear boundary (a road in the case of the lumber mill) between the *danwei*'s work and living quarters, there were a lot of crossings between these two areas. Secondly, the boundaries of the *danwei* space were not only drawn by the wall and river, but also repetitively reinforced by the place-making acts of the workers' community inside the *danwei* and residents outside of the *danwei*. Hence a co-constitution between the spatial transformation of *danwei* and the subjectivities of its workers. On the one hand, people's activities solidified the *danwei*'s position as the most basic unit of production and reproduction in urban China, as well as its important role in urban segregation in the socialist time. On the other hand, the workers' identity and collectivity were built upon the land and space of the *danwei*. The superior material life and status associated with belonging to a state-owned-enterprise *danwei* gave the lumber mill workers' kids, who grew up into the second-generation workers in the 1980s and 1990s, a sense of controlling power and a sense of ownership over the materials within their *danwei*, including the land. Therefore, when the county government wanted to sell the land to private real estate developers in early 2014, the two generations of workers quickly gathered in front of one of the entrances marking the border between the city and the *danwei* to block the road. Their protest was sparked by their sense of owning the *danwei* space. However, this action, which was thought of by the workers as "protecting the state-owned land and their collective property," was criminalized as "disrupting the public order" in reform China. All protesting workers were removed, and one of them was arrested afterwards to warn the rest not to demonstrate again. In the socialist era, to protect the public meant to privilege the *danwei*'s production and workers' lives; while in the post-socialist times, to maintain the public order becomes a narrative that the government utilizes to guard the government's interests in

promoting private enterprise. The transformation of the lumber mill exemplifies how the government-initiated social engineering of space informed people's collective identity and was strengthened by people's everyday acts of spatial construction. Nevertheless when the government privatized *danwei* land and excluded the previously privileged laboring bodies, the workers' senses of belonging, ownership, and attachment did not change immediately because of governmental policy. The workers' feeling of being detached and abandoned from their own space, I argue, were the major resources of their collective actions.

Danwei Revisited: Invisible Space and Impossible Transition

The restructuring of state enterprises beginning in the 1980s was accompanied by the rearrangement of urban life, especially the form of *danwei*. In the beginning of the state enterprise reform, the government saw relieving the *danwei* from their burden of welfare and service provisions as one of the crucial ways to reform the enterprises, increase their productivity, and enable them to survive in a "socialist market economy." For example, the Shunwen Lumber Mill's high school, middle school, and elementary school one after another merged into the county's school system in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The city took over the supply of electricity and water in the same period. The mill-owned clinic still existed until after the 2000 privatization and thus was able to serve former, particularly elder workers, but the mill gradually decreased subsidies for workers' medical care and treatment throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Additionally, with the increase of private business on the streets, the decline of the planned economy, and the abolition of the rationing system in the early 1990s, the *danwei* was no longer the basic unit of urban life. Danwei workers went outside their *danwei* to purchase goods

and conduct recreational activities all the time. The government saw an increase of social fragmentation and a need to reconfigure urban governance. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, we saw two forms of urban arrangement gradually replace the *danwei* as the basic unit of urban life in China: *xiaoqu* (小区, micro-district) and *shequ* (社区, community).

Xiaoqu is a form of enclosed residential space that shares private residences, communal space, and various paid services. As the new basic unit of urban residential territory that replaced *danwei*, in fact *xiaoqu* recalls many similarities of *danwei*. Both of them occupy a territory that provides community facilities and often green areas for the exclusive use of their residents. Both discourage traffic within its boundary. However, the link between workplace and living space has been mostly cut in *xiaoqu*, and *xiaoqu* only functions as a residential and service area. *Danwei* was a multifunctional unit that secured production, facilitated redistribution and consumption, and monitored workers' social relationships and consciousness building. Housing residents from different workplaces and backgrounds, *xiaoqu* doesn't play the role of fostering dense social interactions or cultivating workers' collective identity (Bray 192, Lu 64). In the late 1990s, when *xiaoqu* first emerged, there were many anxieties around whether this form of commercial residential area would decrease people's connections to each other in a shared living space. In a *danwei*, neighbors were also colleagues. They spent a lot of time together at work and in daily life. They knew each other and each other's families very well, and often helped each other out. People observed that many residents in *xiaoqu* don't really know each other. They might live next door, but barely see each other. Some made comments that the affect (感情) among neighbors in a *xiaoqu* is much colder than that in a *danwei*.

Shequ (community) is a grassroots administrative unit demarcated by the government.

The Ministry of Civil Affairs (民政部, *minzheng bu*) defines *shequ* as a territorial division that is regulated by the Street Office (街道办事处, *jiedao banshichu*) and the Residents' Committee (居民委员会, *jumin weiyuanhui*) (Bray 183). *Shequ* replaced the *danwei*'s role in mass mobilization and governing population and collective activities. The employees of the street office and the Residents' Committee are semi-governmental officials. To match *xiaoqu* with *shequ*, usually each big *xiaoqu* or several small *xiaoqu* have a Residents' Committee. A street office managed several Residents' Committees within its territorial area. The combination of *xiaoqu* and *shequ* was supposed to fully replace the residential and administrative functions of *danwei*. However, the transition from a *danwei* system to a *xiaoqu* and *shequ* system was not easy for many former state enterprise *danwei* residents, including those in the lumber mill.

The lumber mill *danwei* once offered all of the services to their residential area, including electricity, water, and cleaning for the communal space. Around the mid-1990s, *xiaoqu* emerged as the popular urban unit in Shunwen. At that point, residents/apartment owners began to pay all of the public utility and service fees to the Residents' Committee (or in some advanced *xiaoqu*, it's called Property Management Committee), which collects all of the money to pay the city for utilities and hire contractors to clean and maintain the communal space. When I conducted fieldwork in Shunwen after 2010, *xiaoqu* had already become the most basic unit of urban life organization. The street office reaches out to and responds to the Residents' Committee in their area as a way to mobilize, monitor, and assist the activities in different *shequ*. However, it was very hard for a post-*danwei* residential community, a community that had been accustomed to collectivist logic to merge with this system. Unlike the property owners of commercial housing,

the *danwei* residents were not used to maintaining their ownership over the apartments through regularly paying for utility and service fees. They felt they were entitled to this kind of infrastructure and benefits as in the former *danwei* era.

After the privatization of the lumber mill, the Street Office and some lumber mill workers attempted to replace the previous *danwei* management system with the new urban organization system. Without an existing Residents' Committee, they tried to let the residents pay the utility and service fees directly to the Street Office, so that the Office could take care of the cleaning, lights, and other public needs. They also tried to let one of the workers do the cleaning of public areas and let her charge money from other residents. Both of these attempts failed because of a similar reason: some of the residents paid the money, but others didn't. Many people who didn't want to pay for public utilities argued that they worked or lived in another city for many months every year and it was unfair for them to pay every month. (After the layoffs, many workers had to migrate to other cities for jobs.) There were a few people who thought the fee was too high. Without a *danwei*'s coordination, it became really hard for these two thousand residents, who were previously entitled to enjoy the free service, to figure out a new way of re-organizing their life.

When I lived in the lumber mill's residential area during 2013 and 2014, all of the garbage from individual households piled up in several spots around the area. Every one or two months, the garbage hills were cleaned by the worker who was supposed to take charge of the public cleaning in the community. She said she planned to clean the garbage every week, but she didn't receive enough money from her neighbors, so she decided to conduct cleaning in a proportionate frequency. The residents who paid money to her were certainly angry about the

fact that she didn't keep the community clean. Under all of the pressures, she told the Street Office that she wanted to quit. But the Office persuaded her to continue for another several months, while the Office would report to the Bureau of Civil Affairs again to see whether the municipal government would be able to fund or provide this service.

The transition from *danwei* to *shequ* has been difficult as well. Before privatization, the Office only needed to talk to different units to coordinate activities in different neighborhoods. After privatization they had to directly talk with residents, who were not used to the new model of commercial residential area management. Moreover, the Office didn't really have much money or many employees that they could utilize. What they could do was to write reports to their superior department and see if any upper-level governmental departments could help. Most of the times nobody responded to their requests. Once one of the sewers in the community was blocked and a foul smell permeated all the apartments near that sewer. The residents talked to the Office, but the Office didn't have any special employee or equipment that could help. So some workers ended up using a shovel and a steel reinforcing bar to pry the big concrete slabs off and cleared the sewer on their own. In the last month of my fieldwork, I found that some city sanitation workers were coming to pick up the garbage every week and roughly clean the whole neighborhood. The workers told me that some provincial leaders were coming to visit Shunwen for an examination of "the city's appearance," so the municipal government sent some sanitation workers to clean the neighborhood. Neither the lumber mill residents nor the Street Office knew how long this would last. In short, the public cleaning services became a very problematic aspect of community life.

Another significant aspect of post-*danwei* life was the darkness of the neighborhood at

night. Privatization of the lumber mill left the public lighting for the whole neighborhood unfunded, including the lights in apartment hallways. So the neighborhood became completely dark at night, except for a few families who voluntarily installed lights in their apartment stairs and paid for the electricity at their own expense. The darkness serves as a metaphor of the omission of the post-*danwei* space in the current system of urban planning. Former lumber mill workers poignantly noted their social invisibility when they discussed the current urban rearrangement: “They can’t see us, even though we are so many people living here!”

“The government tore down the mill buildings and sold the land to real estate developers. Soon some new and expensive skyscraper apartments will stand across the street.” Standing at the lumber mill residential area, several lumber mill workers pointed across the road to the demolished workshop buildings and observed, “But the government never thought about making any changes for those of us who live in old apartments and a dirty environment on the other side of the road.” In fact, when the workers first heard about the real estate development project, they thought their residential neighborhood was part of the areas that would be demolished and replaced. Some workers were happy about it, because they had already tired of the messy environment and lack of management in the post-*danwei* community. They thought that the city government, in order to compensate for their demolished apartments, would give them a new apartment in another part of the city or give them some money so that they could purchase a new apartment somewhere else. But some other people also worried about whether the government would give enough compensation to them or whether the amount of compensation would even come close to enough to buy a new apartment in the city. Regardless of the residents’ diverse opinions, the news proved to be false. A friend of one of the workers, who worked for the Urban

Planning Office, said that on the planning documents for the neighborhood renewal, all of the marks had been drawn only on the mill side of the former *danwei*. The residential area was completely blank on the paper and overlooked throughout the discussion. It is actually not hard to speculate about the reasons for this intentional oversight. To demolishing the factories the municipal government only needed to talk with the owners of the four privatized mills and bargain over the ratio of dividing the land sale revenue. However, if they had wanted to replace the residential community, they would have had to compensate two thousand people. Moreover, it's predictable that many residents, especially those who didn't have enough savings to buy a new apartment (considering that housing costs were extremely high and many of the residents were poor laid-off and retired workers), would definitely try hard to negotiate with the government in their favor. This scenario might demand too much money and time and involve too many employees. In order to avoid the cost and hassle, the municipal government chose to ignore this residential community completely in their design.

In fact, what had been bothering the old workers the most was their sense of being overlooked by the government. They often complained that the city and forestry bureau leaders (领导们) never visited them after the privatization; the city and the forestry bureau stopped giving them cooking oil on holidays, which was a very common benefit in the *danwei* period; and none of the leaders visited them even when their neighborhood was attacked by summer floods. It appeared to me that compared to the loss of economic support, what the old workers desired even more was a sense of caring on the part of the governmental leaders, which would be the symbol of the state and the government still remembering their existence and previous contributions. However, when the *danwei* system declined, the space of *danwei* and the workers

of *danwei* both became invisible. Their feeling of being abandoned, betrayed, and overlooked contributed to their later collective action.

Logging Camps: Urban Danwei in a Rural Landscape

The Shunwen lumber mill was located within the urban landscape so as to easily reach the inter-city roads and railways for transportation of timber and wood products. The thirteen logging camps in Shunwen were dispersed over fourteen rural townships. The logging camps were located close to the mountains and villages that defined this rural landscape. The literature on *danwei* rarely examines *danwei* located in rural areas. An examination of logging camp *danwei* extends our inquiries of this predominantly urban planning form to a landscape that has been traditionally perceived as rural. My interviews with logging camp workers reveal an ambiguity around perceived rurality of the logging camp based on location. One interviewee thus responded, “How could we count as being in the village? Our logging camps were state-owned work units! The villages at that time were very dirty, unorganized (*luan*, 乱), and backward (*luohou*, 落后), while our units were tidy and orderly.” Several of the second-generation logging camp workers, who were born in the 1960s and 1970s as children of the first-generation workers, made similar comments that they did not consider the logging camp to be located in a rural area when they grew up and then worked there.

I visited several logging camps and interviewed workers across different camps as well. Zhangcuo Logging Camp, named after the village it was close to, was the one where I spent the most time (see Figure 6). Like other *danwei*, the Zhangcuo Logging Camp was a walled enclosure. The walls and the buildings inside—modern brick and concrete structures that were

designed based on rationalist architectural doctrines—set the *danwei* physically apart from its rural surroundings, where village houses were mostly built with mud bricks and rural roads remained unpaved throughout the twentieth century. “We were no different from other urban forestry work units. Our colleagues in the public sector working in the city organized several special tours to come see our office buildings and working environment in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We were a model unit at that time.” By saying this, one of the Zhangcuo Logging Camp workers emphasized to me that the logging camps, in terms of the architecture, were literally “no different from other urban forestry work units.” The design, structure, and building materials of the Zhangcuo Logging Camp are identical with those of the Shunwen Lumber Mill. The Shunwen forestry bureau must have worked with the same team of designers and builders or even the same source of materials for all of its subordinate units. The Shunwen Lumber Mill had been demolished, but the Zhangcuo Logging Camp’ buildings still existed when I visited in 2014, in spite of being mostly empty and unused. The Zhangcuo Logging Camp serves as a ghostly presence of the disappeared lumber mill, or a persistent trace of the state-owned forestry system of the last century. Besides the different architectural appearance inside and outside of the logging camp *danwei*, the infrastructure of *danwei* and villages were completely separated too. Within the realm of the logging camp *danwei*, the work and living quarters both were equipped with modern equipment. In the urban area, usually the *danwei*’s electricity, running water and sewage systems were funded by the *danwei* but connected with those of the city. As the logging camps were in rural area, the infrastructure was constructed from scratch and formed a system of its own, instead of joining with neighboring villages. The villages usually did not have any modern infrastructure at that time, and the peasants were banned from taking advantage of the

danwei facilities (Lu 2006, 53-58).

In addition to the logging camps' modern structure and infrastructure, they also enjoyed a higher standard benefits system. After 1955, the allocation of necessities such as grain, cooking oil, and cotton was facilitated with a rationing system. *Danwei* took charge of the management of the rationing system for their employees and their families (Bray 2005, 115). Because the *danwei* could usually get more funds than the city, *danwei* workers usually received more distributed rationed goods than other urban and rural residents. Zhang Jinshui, a peasant from Zhangcuo Village, recalled that when he and other kids in the village were little in the 1960s, their impression of the logging camp workers was not good: "Those northern migrants who came to our place were so arrogant that they looked down upon us." Zhang's memory resonated with the Zhangcuo Logging Camp workers' pride and self-differentiation as *danwei* residents. "To be honest, we envied them so much at that time." Zhang continued, "They had much more food than we did. They received rice and oil every month. We villagers didn't have much to eat in those years, not like them; they even often had meat to eat. Every lunch and dinner time, seeing the smoke rising from the logging camp, we admired them a lot." The rationing system and the welfare system privileged the *danwei* workers and provided them with much more material support than their villager neighbors, which clearly led the villagers and the logging camp workers to have different living conditions and senses of belonging: local belonging vs. modern socialist state belonging.

The hukou system of the PRC was established in 1958, categorizing residents into rural/agricultural hukou and urban/non-agricultural hukou, and the rationing system worked based on the hukou system. It was also in 1958 that the first round of migrants from Shandong came to

northern Fujian, working for the state forestry work units. These migrants, if they had not migrated, would have been rural residents holding rural *hukou*. However, upon migration, the institution of *hukou* and welfare system changed their identities. The “rural peasants” from the north migrated into the southern province of Fujian and turned into “urban *danwei* workers,” even though some of them still worked in the rural mountainous area. As Bray (2005) said, “[under socialism] it was the act of labor itself that determined subject identity” (122). I would add that the acts of labor were differently categorized and valorized and thus differentiated laborers’ identities in the socialist China. Agricultural labor was seen as reproductive, aimed at contributing food and other raw materials to industrialization; while industrial labor was viewed as the core of socialist productive labor, contributing to the building of a modern socialist country. Over the course of history of the PRC, the categorization of forestry switched back and forth between agriculture and industry. When state management of forestry prevailed, forestry was mostly categorized as industry. In the forestry labor of the state logging camps, men’s labor was considered socialist productive labor, while women’s labor reproducing workers and trees did not bring them an officially-recognized state workers’ identity. Socialist modernization, as a discourse, excluded the population who conducted feminized, agricultural, reproductive labor.

During the 1958 migration, the northern “peasants” were uprooted from their hometowns and communities and transplanted into new living and working environments. It was not a spontaneous and pleasant experience for these migrants. Even so, for most people who ended up staying in the Fujian mountains, one of the most crucial advantages was to gain a *danwei hukou*, a valued worker’s identity and its welfare benefits. They were recognized as advanced and modernized subjects, and they subsequently felt superior to the peasants. This rural to urban

identity shift was reinforced by the state's spatial construction. The Zhangcuo Logging Camp was used by the county government as a model of what a modern production-based community space should look in the socialist and early reform era. While the *danwei* was originally designed to be an ideal social space, a *danwei* located in the rural landscape and dramatically differentiated from its rural surroundings was considered as the perfect model to showcase an ideal *danwei*. It was a space not only showing the modernity of socialist production, but more importantly displaying the advanced urban industrialization side by side with the backwardness of the rural agriculture, to show the progress of development and demonstrate that urbanization is the only path to modernization and development. Toward the end of this chapter, I will introduce the forestry tenure reform of the late 1950s and how that caused tensions between the former forest owners/native peasants and the new forest managers/migrant workers. I argue that the spatial construction of *danwei* is also a state technology used to define the advancement of the migrant state workers and thus legitimize these previous outsiders' qualification and ability to take over and manage the forests. This process excluded the native peasants from the modernization program and turned them into outsiders.

From Modernity Model to Shanty Town

The post-restructuring transformation of the logging camps was very different from that of the lumber mill. The lumber mill was completely privatized and all of the workers lost their jobs. Most of the lumber mill workers, even if they went to other cities for jobs, maintained ownership of their apartments in the former lumber mill's residential area. They go back to Shunwen and stay in their apartments for the Chinese New Year and other holidays, or move

back after stopping working. However, as the logging camps were in the rural area, the middle-aged and young laid-off workers all moved to the urban Shunwen in search of more plentiful jobs and urban living conditions around the 2000 enterprise restructuring. From 2000 to 2010, most of the old camp workers still lived in the logging camp-attached residential areas, together with a few workers who still had jobs. The logging camps still coordinated the necessary utilities of the residential areas, but stopped other extra services. When I visited the logging camps in 2013 and 2014, most of the old workers had also left the logging camps. All of the logging camps and residential areas, in spite of their fully equipped infrastructures and modern buildings, were empty.

In 2010, the workers' apartments at the logging camps were categorized as "shanty towns" by the municipal government. Through the national Shanty Town Reconstruction Project, the Shunwen government was able to use the special funds they received to build eight 10- to 12-story apartment buildings and relocate the logging camp workers into these new apartments in the urban area. The location of these new buildings is right next to the lumber mill apartments. The apartments were not free for the relocated workers, as we often heard from the Chinese official media. Instead, each property cost 80,000 to 100,000 yuan. The prices were high for those retired workers and might cost all of their savings, but were low compared to the average housing price in town. Many elders received financial support from their families in order to buy these apartments. The elders told me that they didn't think the logging camp-affiliated apartments in the rural area were bad. But they and their children were worried that if they continued living in the rural area, it would be hard for them to receive good medical treatment and care, considering the generally bad medical resources in the villages. So most of the logging

camp workers' families tried hard to put together money to purchase the apartments.

Categorizing the logging camps' residential area as "shanty towns" and moving the logging camp workers to the urban area were actually a way to reinforce the idea of the impossibility of modernizing rural space. Two to three decades ago, the logging camps, in spite of their rural locations, were equipped with the most modernized and advanced infrastructure and architecture, exhibiting an exceptional modernity to urban colleagues. The boundary between rural and urban, what space can be counted as modern, and ideologies of how rational planning should happen, have changed tremendously around the example of the logging camps. Although the logging camp workers admitted the transportation and medical care were better in the city, many of them still hold that the rural area was a more comfortable living environment for them.

In 2014 a few elders moved back to the rural logging camp apartments. They were not used to the new urban living environment. Some of them kept getting sick after they moved into the new apartments, and the others didn't like the fact that they couldn't easily plant vegetables in the urban modernized neighborhood. They still owned the new urban apartments, but lived in the old rural apartments most of the time. Qian, a driver employed by Zhangcuo Logging Camp, took me to one of the old logging camp apartments. His mother was one of the workers who decided to move back to the rural apartments after living in a new urban apartment for a short period. He regularly (weekly or biweekly) drove between the city and the rural logging camp apartments, visiting his mother, giving the elders rides between their urban and rural locations, as well as transporting goods for them. For example, in April, the season of tamarind fruit, the elders always made tamarind jelly (酸角糕). They picked the tamarind fruits that had fallen from the trees, and Qian bought several dozen *jin* of sugar for them as an ingredient. After they made

tamarind jelly, Qian transported a lot of the jelly to the city for their families or for sale. As the youngest son in a first-generation logging camp workers' family, Qian grew up in the logging camp. He found the cross-family intergenerational rapport really valuable and wanted to contribute his caring labor to the elders.

As the “shanty town reconstruction” *xiaoqu* is located side by side with the old lumber mill neighborhood, these two units that had been both key to the state forestry industry once again started sharing the same living environment after the reform of this industry. Both the logging camp-shanty town reconstruction *xiaoqu* and the lumber mill neighborhood were located on the skirt of the same hill and higher than the surrounding land. The spring of 2014 was an unusually rainy season. After two rainy days in a row, the entries of the two residential communities were completely covered by accumulated flood water approximately one meter in depth. The mobility of the residents was largely limited. “Smell the air. What can you smell?” The sunny afternoon right after the floods left, I visited the shanty town reconstruction *xiaoqu* and the old workers asked me this rhetorical question. “It’s pig manure. The pig farm smells so bad, especially after the flood water spread it around. When we were in the rural area, we smelled the animal waste fertilizer too, but they were not so strong as a whole pig farm. How could they rent the land right by our residential area to a pig farm? We moved ‘up’ to the city, but it’s even more smelly than the village!” His comment shows the logging camp workers’ feeling of themselves standing on or constantly moving across the boundary of the rural and urban.

Extending *Danwei* Space into the Mountains

The logging camp is a special case to study *danwei* and the transformation of *danwei*: not

only were they located in the rural area, but that local environment was also where their productive work took place and where raw materials were produced. Moreover, the shifting status of the *danwei* system during the reform involves a changing relationship between the villages and the logging camps. As discussed earlier, the residents of the lumber mill considered the wood (the production materials of their mill) to be managed by and thus “owned” by the *danwei* residents themselves. The logging camp workers’ power also extended into the mountains and the forests, a space they and the villagers share and have constant interactions in. I contextualize the transformation of logging camp *danwei* and the changing relationship between the workers and the peasants within the shifting forest property rights regulation in China from the late 1950s to the early 1990s.

Changing Policy for Forest Tenure

1950-1952	land reform campaign distributed equally land, forest, and other means of production to farmer households.
1953-1955	Agricultural production organized at three levels: households, mutual aid team, and elementary cooperative.
1956	96% of rural households incorporated into advanced cooperatives; land, forests, and other means of production transferred to advanced cooperatives from individual households.
1958	forests further transferred from advanced cooperatives to people’s commune.
1959-1961	agricultural failure and famine
1961-1964	forest ownership and management devolved from commune to production team or production brigade: scattered trees returned to households.
1966-1979	collectivization of scattered trees owned by households.

Source: Liu Dachang 2001

In the late 1950s, the village commune owned the forestland, yet did not have the right to commercialize the timber due to the regulations of the socialist planned economy. After the camps were built in 1958, the government transferred the user rights of part of the forestland from the villages to the logging camps. The camps then had the rights to produce and sell logs and timber. The logging camps rented the forestland from the villages with leases that did not list a clear tenure. Therefore the logging camps enjoyed temporarily unlimited leases and needed to pay the villages a “mountain fee (山价款)” every year. The space of the logging camps’ *danwei* and the power of the logging camp workers extended into the mountains through these legal contracts. This spatial extension was channeled by the state’s legal and institutional power, and reinforced through the workers’ production activities (planting, nurturing and logging) and security guarding activities (regular patrolling). However, the areas that were newly allocated to the logging camp *danwei* were also constantly disrupted and made unstable by the peasants.

In spite of being unhappy about these “permanent leases,” the peasants did not have strong enough bargaining power when they were forced to hand over their forests to the camps. Furthermore, the villagers didn’t have rights to sell the wood in the planned economy anyway, so they didn’t have enough motivation to start a big collective protest at that time. Nonetheless, “everyday forms of resistance” never stopped (Scott 1985). Zhang Jinshui, the Zhangcuo villager who had described his envious feelings towards the logging camps workers in the 1960s and 1970s, also told me that the peasants often stole trees and branches from the “logging camps’ mountains.” The logging camp workers often grew vegetables around their *danwei* or on some nearby wasteland in the woods. “We [villagers] sometimes stole the potatoes and sweet potatoes those workers planted too.” Zhang laughed out loud. Stealing forest resources acted as one of the

main everyday resistances of the villagers, who were economically, socially, ideologically, and spatially disadvantaged by the socialist development and forest policies.

Compared to the lumber mill, located across the river from Shunwen city residents, the logging camps that shared the mountains with the local villages certainly had much more frequent interactions and conflicts with the peasants due to their spatial closeness. Although the logging camp had user rights over half of the forest land in Zhangcuo and held a monopoly of log sales in the planned economy from the 1960s to 80s, the workers remained hesitant to become involve in direct conflicts with the villagers and thus tended to overlook their comparatively small stealing activities. Most of the forestlands managed by logging camps, which had transferred from the villages, didn't have clear physical boundaries, such as fences or walls, between them and any remaining village-owned forestland. It was not like the common walled *danwei* space. Generations of peasants grew up in these mountains and they knew the mountains so well that if they really wanted to they could easily conduct logging or theft in the woods without letting the logging camp workers know. Not to mention the mountains were so large that the patrol of logging camp workers' security teams could definitely not cover the whole area. The logging camps were aware of their limited capacity and thus tended to maintain their good relationship with the villagers, and certainly didn't want to enlarge the scale of conflicts that might result in purposeful disturbances by the resentful peasants.

The specific ways used to spatially categorize the forestland under the management of the state logging camps also helped the villagers in their resistance. In the northern Fujian mountains, big villages are mostly compact villages located at the base of mountains, with some rural houses dispersed throughout the mountains. The paved public roads only went through the

townships and big villages.²⁵ “The first-layer mountains (一重山)” refers to the mountains closest to the big villages near the roads, with the second-layer mountains farther away (see Figure 7). To reach the second-layer mountains, the log trucks had to drive through the first-layer mountains. In the late 1950s, when the government allocated part of the village-owned forests to the state logging camps and gave them permanent user rights, the government mostly gave the second-layer mountains or even third-layer mountains to the logging camps, while leaving the forestland on the first-layer mountains to the villages.

The following example will show how this 1950s division between “the first-layer mountains” close to the villages belonging to the villages and the more distant “second-layer mountains” belonging to the logging camps enabled the Zhangcuo villagers to conduct small-scale acts of resistance. The collective of Zhangcuo villagers succeeded in forcing the logging camp to follow the rule of “capping (戴帽),” that was to leave the trees on the top third of the mountains untouched by logging. The villagers argued that every mountain needed to have “a cap of trees.” The trees on the top of mountains grabbed the water, they believed, and people needed to save the trees there in order to preserve the mountain springs. If the logging camp cut all of the trees on the hilltops, the villagers would lose their source of natural water. When I listened to this story, I was very surprised and curious about why the logging camp would agree

²⁵ “Big villages” mean administrative villages in the local context. The villages in Fujian are categorized into “administrative villages” (行政村, xingzheng cun) and “natural villages” (自然村, ziran cun). An administrative village has over fifty residential households, and they are usually grouped on the plain below the mountains. All of the administrative villages in Fujian were upgraded with concrete roads by 2000. Households of natural villages are often dispersed and located higher up in the mountains, and thus not easily accessible by motorized transportation. As the name suggests, an administrative village usually hosts the administrative departments for the administrative village and surrounding natural villages.

to this suggestion, even though it was obviously against their interest. “If they didn’t agree, we would completely stop them from logging,” Gui, Zhangcuo’s previous village leader explained. “If the logging camp didn’t agree with our proposal of capping, we would block the roads in the first-layer mountains, which are owned by us villagers. Then their trucks would not be able to get into their mountains. If they had no transportation, their production work would be stopped.” It was illegal for the villagers to block the roads and stop the logging camps’ production. However, it doesn’t mean that the logging camps, the government, or the police officers could really arrest the villagers for that. There are a lot of corners in rural China that cannot be reached by law and law enforcement in China’s legal and political landscape. As in the aforementioned examples of conflicts between the logging camps and the villages, the logging camp leaders understood that they would have to rely on their own negotiations with the peasants, in spite of the state power that they were entitled to.

Gui was the first female village leader selected by Zhangcuo villagers in the early 1990s. I heard from her many stories of how villages opposed state logging camps and the city government. One of the stories that she was particularly proud of happened during her tenure of working as Zhangcuo village leader. In 1993 she established “a team of women mountain nurturers (女子耕山队).” In the late 1980s and early 90s many women in Zhangcuo didn’t have any individual income. Their husbands took charge of the household agricultural revenue. Gui heard a female villager talking about how she didn’t dare to ask her husband for money to buy menstrual pads and she had to wait until she sold a pig in order to get some money of her own. At the same time, the fact that women “don’t make money” was one of the major reasons why the villagers wanted to violate the “birth planning policy” to have multiple kids, especially boys.

In order to advance women's status in their households and to enact the birth planning policy more easily, she started searching for a means to allow women to earn individual income. Around the same time, the Zhangcuo logging camp gradually stopped using their first-generation family-dependent workers, who were all female, and started hiring male migrant workers from Guizhou to plant and nurture trees. The Guizhou workers, who first migrated to northern Fujian in the early 90s, were seen as younger, cheaper, and more docile labor.²⁶ Gui negotiated with the logging camp and succeeded in asking them to hire the local women villagers instead.

“The logging camp leaders were not happy about this, as we women villagers were not as cheap as the Guizhou workers and we didn't give the leaders any kickbacks either, not like what the head contractors of Guizhou people usually did. But they couldn't just simply reject us, because they still needed to care about our local village's power. Moreover, advancing women's status was supported by the national policy too.” If the logging camps were still employing the family dependent workers, they could have rejected Gui's request to hire the Zhangcuo women and could have easily legitimized their rejection by saying they needed to offer jobs first to their employees' family members. But as they had stopped using the labor force from their own *danwei*, this kind of rejection would not work. At the same time, the logging camps needed to negotiate with the local villages and could not just ignore their needs, as I have explained earlier. These negotiations show how state logging camps, as the agents of state power, were resisted at the local level in rural China. The instances can be seen as the negotiations between the state and the local communities. Despite the fact that both the logging camps and lumber mill had absolute power over their walled space and the logging camps' power extended into the mountains with

²⁶ I will expand on the Guizhou workers' lives and work later in this chapter.

the support of the state policy, their power in the mountains was constantly challenged by the villagers. The mountains were a zone where the state power had to negotiate with local rural needs.

All of these conflicts and negotiations that occurred over time between the state logging camps and the villages prepared both parties for their future negotiation, cooperation, mutual reliance, or in my words “contested agreement” during and after the forest resource reform around 2000. In the socialist era, we saw how the native rural peasants disturbed state power through challenging the state logging camps’ control over the forests. In the post-socialist era, the two groups who had been pitted against each other and oppressed by the state in different stages learned to collaborate with each other to negotiate with the state, although this kind of collaboration was still marked with competition and disagreement. In spite of being different and often oppositional interest groups, the state logging camps and rural villages have already been close neighbors for over fifty years. Through their breaking-in phrase that had gone on for decades, they formed many ways of collaboration that were useful during and after the reform around 2000.

Contested Agreements during the Forest Resource Reform

In Fujian, the non-state forestlands were mostly owned by village collectives from the late 1960s to 1990s, in spite of transfers among the commune, production brigade, and production team levels, yet with very limited rights of commercializing/selling the timber due to the control of a socialist planned economy. A very small part of the collective forests, categorized as “wasteland,” were distributed to peasant households as “individual household owned

mountains (自留山)” in the early 1980s. But the peasants didn’t feel secure about their forest ownership, and thus seldom planted or nurtured trees. After 2000 all of the village-owned collective forests were distributed to individual households, and the households regained the right to both plant and sell due to the opening of the wood market. In the beginning, most of the peasants did not care enough to manage their forests and many of them carelessly sold them to others even without a contract. The reason is that policies for forest tenure and management have changed frequently since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, which “left rural people with a complete lack of confidence in the security of [whatever] ownership rights” (Liu 2001, 245). The legalization of inheritable 50-to-100-year leases of forest ownership in the late 1990s in Fujian as well as the tremendous increase of wood prices after around 2003 gradually gained back the peasants’ confidence and interest in the wood market. The forest resource policy first established property rights, then made them legally enforceable, and meanwhile opened up the market for the trading: all of these Washington Consensus-prescribed development policies ensured that capitalism could take root in the mountains (Williamson 2004). The peasants realized that the opportunity cost of “leasing” the forestland to the state logging camps was too high after 2003. Therefore, various conflicts happened among the villages, logging camps, and local government. I propose to not see these conflicts as simply the negotiations between the villages and the state logging camps, with the latter representing state power. Instead, many of the conflicting incidents show how the logging camps and the villages—the two interest groups that have been pitted against each other and oppressed by the forest resource policy in different times—ingeniously collaborated with each other to resist state power and influence the policy making process. The changes in power dynamics between the logging camps and the villages did not derive merely

from the privatization of forest ownership and user-ship, but were also due to the dramatic reform of the logging camps in 2000.

Due to the state enterprise privatization nationwide and environmentalist concerns over deforestation, the logging camps were restructured and most were subjected to logging bans. In Zhangcuo Logging Camp, a thousand workers were laid off between 2000 and 2002. Only some sixty workers were still registered as employees of the logging camp. However they haven't had any significant work to do because of the "logging ban (封山育林)" in their forests, and thus the employees didn't have much income. The logging ban was part of the national Ecological Forest Protection Project (天然林保护工程), and the logging camps received an "environmental protection compensation fee" from the government because of the cessation of logging. The logging camps then redistributed the fee to their employees as salaries, which were only three or four hundred yuan every month. (The amount was lower than the local poverty line.) Therefore most of the current employees had to find other jobs in urban Shunwen, instead of staying in the logging camp. Only a few people, including the director and vice director still resided in the logging camp. They were required to go on patrol around the mountains regularly, because if something bad such as fires happened to the forests, they would be held responsibility. The mountains leased from the villages to the logging camps then became property owned by the villages, maintained by the logging camps, yet actually controlled by the state through the "logging ban." The deforestation was so dominant and strong that it legitimated the state's decision to protect the environment through prohibiting logging. With logging ceased on these forestlands, the logging camp halted major production activity and thus lost its previous power over the land too. The villages and the logging camps were both disadvantaged by the state

environmentalist policy, even though the logging camps still performed the role of guarding the policy. The following three examples will use Zhangcuo Village as an example to show how the logging camps and villages collaborate with and rely on each other, although they still need to perform disagreement or actually have conflicts in between.

In the early 2000s, Zhangcuo Village succeeded in achieving an increase of the “mountain fee,” the rental fee that the village gained through the mountains that were permanently rented to the state logging camps. Their approach was very strategic. Beginning in the late 1990s, the peasants stole wood more frequently from the logging camps’ forests and had many direct conflicts with the logging camp workers. In the meantime the village’s committee (the leadership) actively intervened between the logging camp and the villagers. The committee also reported these conflicts to the municipal and provincial governments to show the peasants’ need to increase the “mountain fee” as the wood price increased. Even though the logging camps still acted as if they were attempting to stop the peasants’ stealing activities, they also went to the governments complaining that they had no capacity to stop them, to indirectly support the village’s proposal of increasing the mountain fee. The logging camps didn’t want more disturbances from the peasants. Furthermore, the logging camps understood that if the municipal or provincial governments agreed on Zhangcuo Village’s proposal, the governments would very likely distribute some special funds for them to pay the “mountain fee,” so the logging camps didn’t need to use their own budget. With the direct request from the Zhangcuo village and the indirect complaint from the logging camp, the “mountain fee” did increase several times for all of the villages following increases in wood prices around 2000. In this example, although the logging camps seemed to be pitted against the villages, they actually agreed with the village’s

request and made efforts to help the villages. In the next example, the villages helped the logging camps deal with a policy that mainly violates the logging camps' interests.

From 2012 to 2014, a policy that both the villagers and the current logging camp employees were eager to talk about was an environmental conservation project called "Blue Mountain Green Water (青山绿水)," Fujian's variation on the national "Natural Forest Protection Project." This project essentially proposed to enact more logging bans for a longer term in areas categorized as "ecological forest" in the Fujian mountains. Most of the logging camps' forestlands were categorized as "ecological forest," because "it's easiest for the government to bully 'state-owned' enterprises, as it is much more difficult to do this to private property in today's China²⁷," Zhangcuo logging camp director argued. In fact, some of the peasant-owned forestland, although much less than that of the logging camps, was categorized as "ecological forest" too. Both the logging camps and the villages thought the compensation fee for "ecological forest" was too low. Especially for many of the logging camps, the compensation fee was their only income, while the villagers still owned some commercial forest and still had other types of income from selling forest resources. Every time I visited the logging camps together with Shunwen municipal governmental officials, the logging camps would propose that the government should raise the compensation fee. And if the villagers were there during the meetings, they would support the logging camps' proposal. One of the ways the logging camp employees and the peasants proposed was to ask the residents or the governments in southern and eastern Fujian in the lower reach of the Min River to pay some "ecological fee" to the people

²⁷ Chinese text: 政府要欺负你“国字头”企业，还不是非常容易？如果他們要这样对私人财产，那在今天的中国就难得多了。

in the North who stopped logging in order to protect the environment and the water²⁸. In this example, although the logging camps actually complained about how the government treated the state-owned enterprises unfairly compared to the private properties (the peasants), the logging camps stood with the villages and made use of their help in attempt to realize their goal.

I often saw how the state logging camps needed to rely on the villages to manage the forest resources and protect the space that was under their management. When Gui and Zhang took me to visit the Zhangcuo Logging Camp, the logging camp's current director and vice director warmly welcomed and met us. After they complained about the difficulties the logging camp faced, such as much less income due to the logging ban, they started talking about some other small incidents that they encountered. They saw some people had built a small workshop in the woods during their patrol a few days ago. Looking at the waste from the operation, they suspected that the workshop was producing silicon or some metal with chemicals. They were not sure who built the workshop or what their background was, and also the logging camp didn't have much of a security labor force anymore, so they were debating whether they should and would be able to intervene. Gui replied without hesitation, "No worries. Tomorrow we will find some villagers to go there, tear down the workshop, and kick out those people." Although the directors had not directly asked for the village's help, I saw huge relief on their faces after hearing Gui's response. On our way back to the village, I expressed my curiosity, "Seems like the relationship between the village and the logging camp is pretty good now. They really appreciated your help. I once thought that you two share the mountains, and most of the mountains they have were transferred from your village by the government, so you two would

²⁸ This idea is similar to the "Payment for Ecosystem Service" in the US.

have many conflicts.” Gui laughed out, “Our good relationship now is a result of our decades of conflicts!”

The conflicts and negotiations that happened on the mountains that were owned by the villages and managed by the state logging camps in the socialist era laid the foundation for their complicated relationship. The state logging camps lost their state-entitled superiorities and state-backed power during reform, while the villages were granted property rights to commodify the forest resources that they owned. The shifting power dynamics during China’s neoliberal transition would seem to naturally cause more conflicts between the villages and the state logging camps. However, in reality because the logging camps and villages have always been pitted against each other by the forest resource policy, with neither well supported by state power, they had to rely on themselves to maintain a good relationship with their neighbors and collaborate with each other to stand against the powerful state arguing for policy change.

Forestry Workers: From Privileged Identity to Marginalized Population

The reform of the state lumber mill and state logging camps didn’t merely change the locations and financial flows of production, but also led to the spatial rearrangement of the workers’ living space. The rural migrant workers from China’s southwestern provinces and Fujian’s neighbor provinces have gradually replaced the state workers, becoming the major labor force of forestry since the 1990s. Guizhou workers serve an example to examine the new rural migrant workers’ living space, to show that the privatization of forestry caused the invisibility of former forestry *danwei* and former state workers’ living space, as well as the spatial marginalization of new laborers who replaced the state workers.

It took me a while to be able to find and meet a few Guizhou workers. Since the early 1990s they have been hired to replace the old logging camp workers logging and planting the trees, and then have been hired by private forestland owners to log their forests since around 2000. They were considered cheaper (less salary and no benefits), more productive, and docile. When I visited the logging camps and villages, I urged the logging camp employees and the villagers to help me find Guizhou workers to interview. They either told me that the workers were working in the further and deeper mountains so we couldn't reach them without a tough truck's half-day driving, which they wouldn't do for me; or simply told me that they didn't know where they were living. After quite a while, I heard from a friend who always hiked around that area that she once saw some Guizhou workers living in some abandoned village houses, where they had organized their own small churches and informal schools for children. (This information was actually confirmed a couple of months later, when I finally met a Guizhou worker in person.) So I went back to one of the logging camps (Longhu) and persuaded the young driver Qian to drive me to the place my friend mentioned. Qian drove me there, but we only saw some empty houses. From inside the houses, it was clear that some people had lived there some months ago and had already moved out. The holy cross painted on the wall of a big house indicated the existence of a previous church. "I told you they moved all the time," Qian commented on my useless attempt, "and we actually don't like them living in our area because they often do something bad." "Something bad? What do you mean?" "They sometimes steal from the forests." Then Qian stopped talking, despite the fact that I asked him to explain and give more details. After I finally met a Guizhou worker named Wei two months later through connections from people who worked in the construction industry, I figured out why Qian

hesitated to tell me what had happened.

Wei complained of the difficulties of working and living in Shunwen. He had lived here for around 20 years, and his children grew up here, but they never had a stable place to live. Because of his job as a logger, he and other male loggers lived in the logging area in the mountains for half of every year. Their wives (and children who didn't go to school) lived with them, cooking, cleaning branches, and doing other informal work for the logger teams. Outside of the major logging and nurturing seasons, they expected to live in some nearby villages to participate in everyday life, educate their children, and have religious activities on their own. That's why they often found some discarded houses to move into, as a way of saving money. However, it was not easy to live in local villages or the logging camps' controlled areas. They were isolated and often kicked out by the logging camp people. Wei explained how they were often caught between different interests and powers in the mountains:

Some big bosses hired us to log the trees, sometimes in forbidden areas. We couldn't resist, because many of them had connections to the government or to the state logging camps. If we didn't do it, some officials would give us more troubles. But when we did do it, and when the forestry patrol teams found us doing that, they sent us to the police department without trying to figure out who were the real employers. Then the logging camp people kicked us out from our houses based on the excuse that we conducted illegal logging in the woods. It was really a dilemma for us.²⁹

Wei's family was living in an apartment they rented in the city when I met him, because it was off logging season and also they wanted to stay with their teenaged daughter who didn't go to school to make sure she wouldn't "be seduced to do something bad in the city." Unlike the

²⁹ "Big bosses" meant private business people. They often had connections with governmental officials or with state logging camp leaders.

previous state workers in the socialist China, the rural migrant workers don't have rights over forestland, have a superior collective identity, or enjoy institutional welfare and protection. Their interactions with the locals, including logging camp workers and local peasants, were completely different from those between the state workers and the local villagers in the socialist era. Their bodies were pushed around into various invisible, illegal, and unstable spaces.

Conclusion

What happened to state workers, a previously very privileged and entitled group in socialist China, and how they have responded during the post-socialist transformation is a major theme I explore through my dissertation. This chapter offers a spatial analysis of their transition within the context of forestry reform and a close look at their changing relationship with the neighboring locals, both city residents and village peasants. When rural migrants joined the state-directed forestry construction program in the 1950s, they were also given pieces of land to build mills and controlling power over their *danwei* space. Their bodies producing lumber and other wood products as well as reproducing trees and laborers on these lands were the embodiment of the Chinese socialist state's ambition of industrialization and modernization. This kind of social engineering of space transformed the once rural landscape into the urban, which inter-constituted the workers' collective identity and subjectivity. This inter-constitution and the workers' sense of belonging and ownership over the land and space in the socialist era became the foundation of the workers' later collective actions in the post-socialist time that I will elaborate in the next two chapters.

Another legacy of this social engineering of space is the frenemy relationship between

the forestry workers and the peasants. After the state-endorsed outsider, forestry workers intruded into the space of local peasants, the peasants have been resisting the state-imposed policies ever since. Their resistance has ranged from everyday forms of dissent, to proposing change within the institution, to collective protest. The state logging camp workers, the supposed agent of state power, often connive and assist the peasants' resistance. It's mainly because of their spatial relation and their similarly (yet not always simultaneously) marginalized interests under national reform policies. The social engineering of *danwei* space, which was intended to channel the state power to differentiate and antagonize the workers and the peasants into conflicts in order to manage them, unintentionally built contested agreement between these two parties. However, today's rural migrants have neither the support of any remaining socialist state power (like the state workers) nor the security of local residence and protection under reform policy (like the peasants). Therefore, for them, the new working class, this kind of contested agreement is impossible to build with either the peasants or the state workers.

Chapter III: Speaking Bitterness as Resistance: The Gendered Narrative Performance of Elderly Forestry Workers

“Old Miao, the reporter wants to interview you.” The grandma who took me to the residential community of the retired logging camp workers pointed to me, when she was talking to an old man. With his shirt sleeves lifted and pants rolled up, he sat on the stairs and kept his back straight. Beneath grey knitted brows, a pair of cautious eyes looked at me. Me? I was trying to use my camcorder to capture a long shot of the old workers sitting on and around the stairs of the courtyard, chatting or playing card games with each other. But suddenly, I felt embarrassed to see the old man’s alert eyes staring at me and my camera. My feeling was worsened by hearing the grandma introduce me as a reporter, even though I had repeated to her many times that I was not a reporter. But, look at me, I was a young person with a professional camera asking for an interview. Who could I be, if not a reporter?

I introduced myself, “Hello, Grandpa Miao, my family name is Zhou. I’m a doctoral student, I’m writing my dissertation, and I wonder if you can tell me about your life in the logging camp. My family members also worked for the state lumber mill, so I want to write about the history of the former state forestry workers.” I always used my student identity and my family history to legitimize my interview. After asking some questions about my family and my previous interviews with the lumber mill workers, he seemed less doubtful and started talking about the logging camps. Surprisingly, his talk did not focus on his previous working experience. Instead, he told me how the state “fooled” the *women dependent workers* into coming to Fujian

and working in the logging camps in the early 1960s. He mentioned how, for decades, the local government and the logging camp cadres had illegally ignored the dependents' rights to register as workers and to enjoy workers' benefits. He invoked direct quotes from legal provisions, citing the years that these legal articles and acts were released, to prove that the government's behavior had been illegal. He vividly described how he negotiated with and beat the cadres with his legal knowledge. I was amazed that he did not mind being filmed when loudly talking about these interactions with the local government. At some moments, I felt that he was performing. Other workers, my camera, and I were all his audience. Or maybe he was trying to make use of the interview as an opportunity to let his coworkers know about his contribution to the workers' protest against and negotiation with the government. I could not figure it out, but regardless, his speech, as well as my camera, attracted much attention from other old workers. They looked at us, discussed the scene we had created, got closer to listen, or even jumped into the conversation.

An old grandma who still held her wooden knitting needles and a half-completed sweater walked up to him and whispered, "Did you tell her about our situation?" Even though Miao gave her an affirmative answer, "Yes, I'm telling her about the issue now, and don't hurry, we need to tell it step by step," she still seemed anxious and thus decided to tell me on her own. "We worked for the logging camp for thirty years. We came when we were still girls. At that time, we wore ragged clothes and worked in the mountains no matter whether the days were rainy or dark. Our jobs were so bitter, but now they don't give us our pension." When she talked to me, her sharp eyes, upturned mouth, and waving needles in her hands all made me feel she was antagonistic. "You must write about us, and let those central government leaders know. You must." She turned to another old woman and said to her, "We don't care. We need to push her to write about us, no

matter whether it will be useful or not.” She then stopped talking to me, and her participation in the interview attracted more men and women to join the conversation. Gradually, the interview developed into an interesting symphony: Old Miao and other two men slowly listed the legal problems, while grandmas passed by from time to time, highlighting their bitterness in previous work and urging me to report their issues.

This group of former state logging camp workers have petitioned the local and provincial governments since 1998 for a labor rights issue that affected over a thousand first-generation women dependent workers. Ten years later, the local township government and forestry bureau finally agreed to compensate the dependents who did not have pensions to the tune of 320 yuan every month. During that ten years, the workers tried several strategies: sit-ins outside the forestry bureau, lawsuits in the local court, and formal and informal petitions to the governmental officials of the town, the province, and the state. Based on the way the male and female workers talked to me, a supposed “journalist who can report up to the state,” I could tell this was also their way of petitioning to the government. Petition, as a narrative performance, requires group practice and rehearsal through long-term reiterative exercise. Here, I do not mean that they actually discuss who says what or conduct a scripted rehearsal. What I would like to point out is that through their ten-year collective petition, they have formed a certain type of division of labor for presenting their issues. This division of labor was highly gendered in the case of the logging camp workers: male workers argued based on the legal discourse, while female dependents spoke of the bitterness of their previous work.

Speaking bitterness (*suku*, 诉苦), a traditional oral genre of Chinese rural society, was taken up and reinforced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in a series of ideological

education campaigns to solidify class conflict and class identity among peasants, workers, and women. One of the campaigns was conducted in Chinese urban factories in the 1960s, targeting workers, particularly women workers. It is speaking bitterness, a historically specific practice and a culturally specific form of women's narrative practice, that, I argue, enables the People's Republic of China's (PRC) first-generation women workers to organize their life stories in both everyday narrative and collective resistance. Specifically, speaking bitterness was the narrative pattern that the logging camp dependents performed in their petition speech, and was both the cause and the result of the gendered division of labor in their endeavor. In this chapter, I first contextualize speaking bitterness by explaining how it has been practiced by diverse Chinese groups in the second half of the twentieth century, albeit with different audiences, content, and political agendas. I then analyze the retired state women workers' speaking bitterness as a narrative performance and a form of labor, and compare it to the storytelling of China's younger-generation rural migrant women and that of the retired male workers. Speaking bitterness, as a means for self-valorization, constitutes the dependents' subaltern subjectivity and their gendered petition strategy, which enables them to differentiate themselves from the dominant reform discourse and to value their own labor and lives. By doing so, speaking bitterness was turned around on those who had initially encouraged it. It was supposed to recite how horrible the old feudal society had been, in order to make a sharp contrast to how good the current society was under the CCP's management. But the protesters turned it against the party—which had changed, betraying them—as well as the neoliberal state.

Speaking Bitterness in Context

Scholars have discussed speaking bitterness as a tool of political mobilization and collective identity formation in the PRC in different contexts. The political meaning of speaking bitterness was rooted in the Land Reform Movement (1950-53), and was an effective technique used by cadres to mobilize the masses to join in the land collectivization movement. It usually happened in the form of group meetings in a public or communal space, with designated “role models” speaking about their bitterness. Women and elderly peasants, as typical “bitterness speakers” (*ku zhu*, 苦主), as well as their narrative of their bitterness experienced before liberation (1949), created a public opinion space that valued the memory of past suffering through denunciation of it and celebrated the present that had been created by the communist party. With this technique, the CCP was able to narrow the huge gap between its newly constructed class discourse and the daily practice of peasants, to subsume rural people under state control, and to realize their goals of nation building and rural governance (Li, 2007; Ye, 2008). Afterwards, speaking bitterness was employed in class struggle sessions during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) to legitimize the workers’ and young adults’ rebellion and violence against authorities and intellectuals. The writers of “scar literature” (*shanghen wenxue*, 伤痕文学), a genre that thrived following the Cultural Revolution, deployed speaking bitterness to include testimonials of intellectuals’ experience of violence during the Cultural Revolution. In its original use during the Land Reform, women and old peasants spoke their bitterness about oppression by landowners; in its later use, intellectuals spoke their bitterness of experiences in the Cultural Revolution. Although the source of suffering, the subject of subalternity, and the political oppressors were different, the narrators who experienced Maoist ideological education

and the expressive technique of denouncing the past and celebrating the present exemplify a historical continuity within the practice of speaking bitterness. It has subjected peasants, workers, women, intellectuals, and others to the state's claims about the legitimacy of economic and political changes in different periods of the PRC—past and present.

Lisa Rofel's documentation of female workers' complaints in a state-owned textile factory in urban Hangzhou demonstrates the renaissance of speaking bitterness in an earlier moment of the PRC's post-socialist transition. Women workers complained heavily in their daily conversations about their sufferings before liberation and during the subsequent time when they were working for socialist construction. Rofel contends that through speaking bitterness, people constructed new subjectivities as "subaltern subjects." In the post-Mao/post-socialist era (1977-present), the state valued neither women's speaking bitterness nor socialist workers' identity any longer. Rofel argues that in this time, through a nostalgic narrative, the oldest cohort expressed a longing for continued recognition that would lend a heroic quality to their identities in a way that the dominant discourse deemed inappropriate (Rofel 1999). My subjects, the first-generation forestry women workers, are roughly equal to the generation of Rofel's "oldest cohort." I agree with Rofel that it was in the workplace of this newly expanded state industry since the 1950s that urban Chinese women learned and performed speaking bitterness in the Maoist era (1949-1976). Rofel also observes how women workers continued speaking bitterness, even though the State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) during the early reform stopped creating space for it. My research extends the examination of women workers' speaking bitterness to a later time period, to a space outside labor production, and to a scene that occurs with collective resistance.

In post-socialist China, scholars have observed diverse forms of narrating sufferings of

the past. Chinese movies frequently represent the misery of wartime and the pre-revolutionary period. “Speaking bitterness” often structures historical fiction in Chinese media, in which local stories of personal suffering are transformed into collective memory and narratives of “blood and tears.” As a new fashion of tourism, urban middle class people travel to rural areas, eating coarse food as a way of “eating bitterness” (*chiku*, 吃苦). This type of consumption incorporates the idea of experiencing the bitterness of the past in order to celebrate the present rise above it (Park, 2008). Scholars from diverse academic disciplines describe the above phenomena with the term “speaking bitterness” and view the activities as evidence of a renaissance of “speaking bitterness” in post-socialist China. However, as I demonstrate, these acts of remembering suffering have appropriated “speaking bitterness” in a way that does not help to construct subaltern subjectivities any more. Bitterness does not function as a tool with which the speakers affirm collective identity as an oppressed class; instead, it often constitutes a middle-class identity with a celebration of farewell to the possibility of being oppressed.

Yan Hairong examines how the sufferings of Chinese female domestic workers (*baomu*, 保姆) have been presented and embodied in various ways. Chinese *baomu* are mostly from rural China, and as a group are subjects that emerged at the moment when post-socialist reform led to China’s economic incorporation with global capitalism. Yan illustrates that the narrative patterns of *baomu* talking about their sufferings is fundamentally different from speaking bitterness (2008; 2012). Speaking bitterness was used to merge individual suffering with collective misery and to build a sense of class belonging. However, the *baomu*’s personal narrative about former sufferings usually ends with the story of her current progress or success, which is often connected with an imagined effacing of her *baomu* identity and class position. Speaking

bitterness confirms a subaltern identity, while the *baomu*'s personal narrative escapes from it. Speaking bitterness secures workers in their working-class position and promises a modernity to which workers can contribute. *Baomu* narratives in Yan's research follow the logic of entrepreneurship and the individual's own responsibility to overcome poverty and achieve "success." The *baomu* narrative shows insecurity as "working class-in-itself," in Karl Marx's term, as well as imagination of future self-development and desire of advancement in class position (1965). The studies on young rural migrant women exemplify the differences between recalling the painful past that celebrates current success and the Maoist speaking bitterness that constitutes subaltern subjectivities.

Women State Worker: Failed Mother, Successful Female Worker

First-generation forestry workers, now in their seventies and eighties, were among the generation mobilized to participate in the Maoist ideological education campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁰ They, especially women, have learned speaking bitterness as one of their oft-used narrative patterns. When the women workers told me their life experiences, either via interviews or informal chats, they all emphasized how "bitter" their previous work and life was, recalled pre-liberation suffering stories, and vividly described the difficulties of their previous jobs in the forestry units. Because of their different statuses in the work units, diverse literacies, and various storytelling environments, the women workers presented distinctions in speaking bitterness performance. Particularly, the stories of women state workers and women dependent workers

³⁰ The documents I found in the lumber mill's archive confirmed that they had organized "speaking bitterness" meetings.

held different emphasis, structure, and emotion, which produced different kinds of subaltern class collectivities. I use the narrative of four women workers to elaborate the distinctions.

Among all the lumber mill cadres from the 1960s to the 1980s, only two were female. Zhuang Jingxian was one of them. She is quite respected by both generations of lumber mill workers and their families. Zhuang migrated from Shandong to aid the mountain area construction in Fujian in 1958, at the same time as her husband. Before migrating, she was a leader of a CCP-organized women's group (*funü zhuren*, 妇女主任) in her village. In this role, her main responsibility was to mobilize women to go out from home and to work in the field. She first tried to talk to and call women out, but if these soft techniques did not work, she would cut women's braids, because "Women having their braids cut means that they would go outside to work. When women wanted emancipation, we had to go outside. Men and women would then become equal."³¹ Because she was a women's group leader and a party member, she became one of the first-round of migrants from Shandong, who were mostly male. She and her husband came to Fujian at the same time, and both of them were state workers. Her husband was a worker throughout his job tenure, while she was gradually promoted, becoming the leader of the plywood shop floor in 1989. After her retirement in 1993, the lumber mill hired her to manage and reform a newly built decoration material shop floor for five years until 1998, when she was sixty years old and decided to stop working to care for her grandson.

³¹ Chinese text: “（妇女）辫子剪掉就是要出去干活了。妇女要翻身，就要出来，男女平等。” In fact, when I asked her whether she thought men and women had ever been equal, she directly answered, “No way. How is that possible? Men and women have never been equal.” So I speculate that when she said “when women wanted emancipation, we had to go outside. Men and women would then become equal,” she was citing some slogans or official text from her memory of that time when she was the women's group leader.

When Zhuang recalled her life memories, she focused so much on the sufferings of her childhood in wartime (e.g. starvation) and the difficulties of her early years of working in the lumber mill. Her “failure as a mother” (in her own words) was told as the most crucial evidence of the latter. After Zhuang and her husband moved to Fujian together, they brought their one-month-old daughter and her husband’s two-year-old little brother. However, the lumber mill required detachment from children as a condition for joining. “There was a Shanghainese guy who worked for the preparation and construction office, and he wore a pair of wingtip shoes. He saw us bringing the children, ‘If you are acting like this, how can you go to training? No way! Deal with the children as soon as possible.’” Zhuang had to send the children to a nearby village and hire a local rural helper and a Shandongnese migrant worker’s wife to take care of them. “I had to stop breastfeeding my daughter. I left them there and wanted to go back to the truck, but my child kept crying. She had cried so long that she could even hardly make any sound. I looked at her through the window and finally decided to leave.”

She delivered another two children in the following years. Right after she had the third baby, she brought the two elder children back with her and asked the two older ones to take care of the newborn at home. “How can children take care of babies well? They didn’t know how to take care of the youngest. One day I went back home and saw her foot was burnt by hot water. I had no choice but to take her to the shop floor and put her on the plywood piles while I was working. Nobody looked after her. The shop floor was so warm that sometimes she was too hot and her butt turned red. But she was very cute and other coworkers went to hold her from time to time.” Fortunately, the lumber mill established a nursery-kindergarten soon after that, and Zhuang was able to send her baby there. The new national policy also enabled breastfeeding women workers

to take two half-hour breastfeeding breaks, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, besides the lunch and nap break at noon for all workers. Zhuang always rushed to feed her baby during the breaks and quickly returned to her work without any delay. “Even the helpers of the nursery-kindergarten thought I worked too hard. I am a really careful person, and I do not want to be late for anything. This might be related to my sufferings and bitterness as a child. Now, since we are working, the first thing we need to do is to follow the party, to take responsibility for the work.” Right after this, she started telling her excellent work performance, recognition, and appreciation from the leaders and coworkers, as well as her promotions and awards. The changing construction of motherhood in socialist and reform China can help us contextualize Zhuang’s organization of her narrative. That women focused on work instead of childbearing was not understood as “failure” in the socialist period, as joining in the socialist production and construction was seen as an honor and a path to women’s liberation. As the reform discourse of motherhood came to emphasize concern over children’s healthy growth, education and career development as a mother’s priority, Zhuang’s story of not considering her daughter’s health and her son’s career more important than her work ethic shifted to frame her attitude as a “failure.” However, for Zhuang, a person who was educated in the Maoist gender project, the “failure” of motherhood in the private sphere served as the mark of her work as a liberated woman in the public space, the evidence of her hard and responsible work, and the foundation of her pride of being a worker.

Her painful childhood in the pre-liberation time and her heartbreaking failure in taking care of her own children have been closely connected to and even constructed as causes of her success as a good woman worker. Before Zhuang was promoted to leader of the plywood shop

floor, the workplace had a male leader who focused exclusively on production capacity, rather than product quality, resulting in the loss of many clients. Zhuang explained how she turned the situation around:

After I took over, I became very strict about the quality, and I took our plywood samples to different places to market them. Once I went to Shandong and the client there didn't believe the quality of our products had improved after the former male leader, so I told him, 'Well, I will leave a board here and let it soak in water overnight. I will come back tomorrow morning, and if it has any air bubble, I will leave; and if it's still good, we can continue talking.' The board was in good shape the next morning and he finally believed in our quality. I then told him that I would give him two train cars of board for free, and he could build the houses to test the quality first. He was very amazed by me and bought a lot of our products since then.

Later she added another detail to the story of this Shandong trip. In order to obtain the contract, she “followed Shandong’s local custom and drank three cups of hard liquor, over one *jin* (斤),” to thank the customer.³² Drinking a lot of alcohol in a business dinner, making a bold yet correct decision, and impressing a client are considered as very masculine behaviors in China today. In Zhuang’s narrative, these behaviors qualify her to be a good leading worker in a socialist factory in the early years of reform. They did not make her less feminine, but made her better than male counterparts. In my interview with the first-generation state women workers, no matter whether cadres or ordinary workers, I often found memories related to jobs were filled with courageous spirit and pioneering characteristics. Their narratives often included several examples of better job performance than their male co-workers. To sum up, speaking the bitterness that she experienced as a girl in the pre-liberation time and as a “failed” mother during

³² *Jin* is a Chinese measurement for units of weight. 1 *jin* is equal to 500 g.

her work in the socialist construction, was the necessary step for her to claim her proud socialist woman worker's identity. This narrative was Zhuang Jingxian's means to self-valorize her labor history during and after the privatization of her work unit.

Constructing Differential Motherhood through Speaking Bitterness

My interview with my maternal grandmother in 2011 was the first interview I conducted with the first-generation forestry workers. That interview inspired me to think of women's speaking bitterness as narrative performance and self-valorization. Her interview showed the variation of speaking bitterness in terms of the construction of motherhood and the differential means of self-valorization (Zhou, 2015). "My life was bitter since my childhood. We were liberated when I was sixteen, and my father died when I was ten." Her life story started from her miserable childhood before liberation (1949), particularly her life in a landowner's household as a servant. "She [the landlady] made her daughter a new pair of cotton shoes to keep her warm, while she didn't even give me a pair of shoes at all. When it was snowing, I was barefoot, carrying water outside." Every time, she emphasized it was the "Liberation" that saved her from being trapped by the landowners. After that, she usually went back to her dramatic description of how her father was "killed" by the Nationalists, even though I found out later her father's death was not really related to his experience of being arrested by the Nationalists. My grandmother ended her life-story with "Ah, [people] like me, who were not liberated until we were sixteen years old, had very bitter lives. If my dad hadn't died, I wouldn't be so bitter. My father died early." She often asked, "Oh, is my story bitter? Is your grandma's story bitter? It's bitter. I have been bitter my whole life." By the frequency of telling this story and by her ending it with these

rhetorical questions, it is not hard to tell that her appeal to be heard is strong. My grandmother's speaking bitterness practice has lasted for forty years. She learned speaking bitterness in the Maoist women's education group in urban factories, and practiced it to show her support to the party's narrative of a working-class victory and gender liberation. She, as a single mother, also performed speaking bitterness for the unit leaders in order to seek help for her family. In a previous article, I examine how my grandmother reshaped speaking bitterness for a variety of personal purposes before, during, and after the enterprise privatization. In terms of the technique, content, audience, and result of speaking bitterness, the practice traversed the boundary between personal and political, domestic and public, and productive labor and reproductive labor (Zhou 2015).

In order to win a good job for my oldest uncle, my grandmother kept sobbing about her sufferings as a previously miserable child, a widow, and a single mother, in front of the factory leaders. She politicized her personal stories and told them in the public sphere, in order to search for material and immaterial support for her own family. In the Maoist era, when women workers spoke their bitterness in domestic or public domains, the state was their imagined audience. With speaking bitterness aimed at the state, my grandmother solved the problems of job placement for her four children and secured her own job transfer. In the post-Mao era, with the marginalization of the working class and the privatization of the SOEs, the state stopped listening. The state was no longer a bridge between women's complaints and their material or emotional compensation. Consequently, my grandmother's children and grandchildren became her main audience, and domestic labor in the past and present became her main complaint subject. How she raised a pig for sale in order to prepare money for my uncle's wedding, how she retired early in order to

secure my mother's job, and how she helped to take care of my cousins when they were little—all these became the focus of her speaking bitterness into the 2000s. Compared to the lack of proper childrearing in Zhuang Jingxian's storytelling, my grandmother tends to highlight her time and labor contribution to reproductive work for her children and grandchildren.

Unlike my grandmother, who highlights her importance in her children's job searches, Zhuang, in her interview and daily narrative, often mentioned that she was useless and even an obstruction to her son's job; "my son was harmed (*hai*, 害) by me." Most of the children of the first-generation forestry workers were assigned jobs in the forestry units in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Zhuang was one of the most crucial cadres in the lumber mill, she could have easily made use of her power to secure a good job position for her son. But she did not. Instead, she even rejected offers by other cadres to let her son work in their shop floors or departments. She told another cadre who offered help that "you are a leader; I am a leader too, and I don't want to cause trouble for you. It's 1985, during the rectification of the party; we as party members cannot do this." Her son ended up working in the collective enterprise subsidiary of the lumber mill. The collective workers were treated worse than the state workers before, during, and after the privatization of enterprise. In parallel research dealing with the post-socialist economic transition in Poland, Elizabeth Dunn (2004) points out that the "privatization of persons" happened together with the "privatization of enterprise." Before the privatization, workers valued their "embedded personhood" or *znajomosci*³³; after that, workers who had lived under socialism still believed that labor should be a relation between people, not between people and things, or

³³ This term is equivalent to *guanxi* in a Chinese context. It generally means social relationships between people.

things and things. In my grandmother's case, speaking bitterness acted as a form of labor that kept relations going between her and the unit leaders, and even with other colleagues and neighbors before the enterprise privatization. This labor created benefits for her family, and by speaking about labor, she helped her family to memorize her contribution. However, in Zhuang's interview, bitter feelings associated with her "failure" of motherhood in the domestic sphere reinforced her proud worker's identity in the public domain. She avoided using her labor to secure her son a job, but she often mentioned that as a shop floor leader, she put a lot of time and labor into "conducting ideological work" for her subordinate workers, letting them "take care of life and work" (*gao hao gongzuo he shenghuo*, 搞好工作和生活). The work unit functioned as the agent between the state and families. It helped the state to manage the lives of individuals. As a cadre of a state work unit, Zhuang helped the state to monitor and coordinate people's work and living, making sure households and communities are stable. Therefore, talking with workers and dealing with the family conflicts were essential parts of the job for Zhuang, and often became the stories that she was proud of recalling. She was particularly proud that she often went to the home of married couples who fought with each other, talked to them, and succeeded in preventing many couples from getting divorced. Although she was a "failed" mother, she saved many marriages and cared for workers' individual lives. In other words, in Zhuang's narrative, she did not succeed as a domestic mother, but performed quite well in her socialized motherhood; she devalued domestic motherhood in order to valorize socialized motherhood, which was essential for the construction and maintenance of her socialist woman worker's identity, before, during, and after the work unit reform.

Intersectionality and Construction of Subaltern Subjectivity

The women state workers and women dependent workers labored in disparate positions and environments, with the latter group not enjoying the same labor relations and benefits as the former. Therefore, in spite of both groups being composed of working women, the identities of members of the two groups differed significantly in the past, as they do into the present. These differences had (and continue to have) impacts on their life narratives and made the stories these women told generally distinct. In what follows, I examine two dependent workers' narratives to explain how they differ from those of the state women workers. Yet I use my grandmother's story to show that the state's categorization of women workers into two groups with different workers' statuses—state workers and dependents—did not foreclose the possibility of self-determined identity and subjectivity. In addition to their external identity, which the state regulated, the intersection of household conditions and literacies affected women's lived experience, subaltern subjectivity, and ways of utilizing speaking bitterness in the construction of life history.

I was introduced to a grandma called “Xiaomei” (which means “little sister” in Chinese) just two days after the three-year anniversary of her husband's death. She looked sad, and told me a lot of things about her husband: he was hard-working, did a lot of housework, understood her, and tolerated her bad temper. He had migrated from Shandong to Fujian in 1958 as a single man, then went back to his hometown and married her through matchmaking there. She went to Fujian with her husband in 1963, and had worked as a dependent in the logging camp since then. Much like the other women interviewees, Xiaomei started her description of previous work with the following statement: “It was so bitter.” She continued, “We went to work before 8 am, with a

box of steamed rice and a bowl of prepared food. We always ate meals in the mountains. We went out in the morning and came back after the day got dark. Sometimes, it was too dark to see anything. It was so much work for us dependents. Except for some days of really heavy rain, we worked every day, including some regular rainy days. If the logging camp assigned us to take charge of this mountain, we had to finish it.” All male and female logging camp workers recalled interesting stories about hornets. Dependents, including Xiaomei, always associated hornets with strong and lasting fright. “There were tall grasses in the woods, and we had to push them aside by hand in order to move forward. There were a lot of hornets. When we whacked the grasses (one of the major jobs of the dependents), sometimes we hit hornet nests. We lay down, covered our faces with the bamboo hats, didn’t dare to make any sound, and hid ourselves until all the hornets left. Once we heard a woman screaming, and after we ran to see her, she had already got many dark hornet stings on her body, and a swollen bruised tongue. Several of us slowly carried her back home and called a doctor to treat her. After that, she never went back into the mountains. She was so scared. Some people died from the hornet’s stings too.”

When I went to the lumber mill, I visited an old woman, who had treated my mother well when she was little. My mother asked me to call her Laoniang (姥娘). *Laoniang* is a term used by Shandong people to address their maternal grandmothers. One year after I met and conducted a two-hour interview with Laoniang, she passed away. She was 78. Other interviewees told me she died from cancer. When I interviewed her, she did not know she had cancer, although she did complain about her increasingly poor health. She attributed it to working too hard before. “We carried the railway ties up to the train by stepping on a wooden board, which bridged the ground and the top of the train. The end on the top of the train was so tall! Like a first-floor building tall.

We two women carried an over-one-hundred-*jin* railway tie. The wooden board was not wide either. We even worked in that kind of dangerous situation, and we were so pathetic. Sometimes, the ties got wet because of the rain, and they got stuck on our shoulders and thus were really hard to throw into the train. If you didn't work, you didn't have money; but if you worked, you felt scared. If the ties fell on your head, you would lose your life. Have you ever seen the ties? Two and half meters long.”

Besides the evocative and vivid description of their previous work and difficult working environments, both Xiaomei and Laoniang, like other dependents, compared their previous work with that of the state workers. “We dependents, over 500 women, worked day and night. The workers worked for only one shift, but we worked for three shifts. When workers were working, we were working; when they got out from the work, we went to carry the products; and we didn't sleep at night either.” Laoniang said they were often called to move the products to the train during the night, if the trains arrived at night. She also insisted that, “We earned a lot of money, even more than what the state enterprise earned.” Xiaomei, after she compared her work to that of state workers and claimed it was much more “bitter,” started addressing the pension issue: “We worked so long and so hard. But now, after we retired, we do not even have any pension. We have nothing. My old man died, and the government then supported me with 300 *yuan* every month.”

Why the dependents emphasized the comparison between their work and that of the state workers is not hard to understand. In the past, the differences in working conditions and workers' status between them were distinguishable. More importantly, dependents from both the lumber mill and the logging camp have fought for their rights in order to be equal to those of the state

workers in various periods. Arguing that their jobs were as hard as or even harder than the state workers' was the major point that the dependents felt compelled to make in their petitions. Yet what made the narrative of dependents and state workers obviously dissimilar was that the state workers manifested proud worker identities in their memories, while the dependents associated previous work experience not with pride, but with resentful feelings. Past sufferings from work resulted in state workers' positive understanding of their work experience, because their labor was valued by the socialist state for decades. However, past sufferings from work could not lead to dependents' favorable attitudes towards their labor experience, as they had never been considered "workers" by the state, particularly by their work units. Yet the dependents did insist on their labor contribution to the factories and to the local economy. This affirmation is especially strong for the logging camp dependents because their over-a-decade-long petition struggle framed their labor contribution as the fundamental basis of their argument.

Do the dissimilar patterns between the life histories of "workers" and "dependents" mean that state-imposed categories single-handedly decided how women organized their narratives and memories? My research denies this single-axis structuralist assumption. My grandmother's story demonstrates that women's different relations to their labored pasts, and accordingly different constructions of subjectivity, resulted from the intersection of state classification of workers' status (an external identity), work experience, and household needs. Since my grandmother was a widow, the lumber mill saw her as the breadwinner of her family and thus, as an exception, registered her as a state worker. However, her lived experience was very different from those of most other state women workers. Since she was the only source of family income, she had to do double or even triple the normal amount of labor for a worker both inside and outside of the

home. Compared to her factory work, her memories associated with domestic labor were stronger, and her identity as a proud factory worker was weaker. One of the old dependent workers that I interviewed was my grandmother's good friend, and she said it was very hard for my grandmother to raise four kids and recalled that my grandmother was always busy with chores, including raising pigs for extra food and money. But she was also very clear about the fact that my grandmother was a worker, not a dependent, and thus her job position and income were more stable than those of dependents. Widowhood and a related emphasis on reproductive work are in the center of my grandmother's life narrative as well as others' memories of her. Additionally, most of the state women workers had formal education, ranging from a couple of years in small locally-organized classes to middle-school education. Their literacy was generally higher than that of the dependent workers. Despite being a state worker, my grandmother is illiterate, and the women's ideological education group was the only formally organized and text-based education opportunity she had, from which she learned the speaking bitterness technique. Due to her distinctive life experience, given all of the interviews that I conducted with the first-generation women workers, my grandmother's life narrative pattern and subjectivities were much closer to the dependents, instead of her women state worker colleagues.

Even though the state's institutionalization of workers' status and job positions deeply penetrated into the women workers' lives and divergent memories around their labor, household conditions, lived experience, and literacies also affected individual women's identities and ways of associating with their labored pasts. The women dependent workers and other women workers who were excluded from the state sector workers' body, including my grandmother, mostly saw themselves as part of an exploited and oppressed group who were mistreated by the state—a

view around which they formed their subaltern subjectivity. This subaltern subjectivity was then mobilized for their collective resistance after the post-socialist reform.

Legal Discourse + Speaking Bitterness = Gendered Teamwork

When I first started searching for oral history interviewees for my research, people in the lumber mill community recommended that I interview male workers and female state workers. All workers believed that dependents were unable to produce stories worth listening to or to clearly narrate their stories. The dependents themselves agreed, and declined my invitations to be interviewed: “Don’t interview me. I’m mostly illiterate and I don’t know how to tell stories.”³⁴ Moreover, the differences between the storytelling of the “state workers” and the “dependents” did not always fit within state-determined categories, but were shaped by the classification of labor relations. Due to these differences, the dependents, who tell vivid yet complaint-ridden stories, are considered unqualified interviewees and storytellers by the workers’ community. The narrative of the state workers, on the other hand, that sets the mainstream historical tradition as background and communicates individualized heroic stories, is considered more valuable. For instance, Zhuang told her stories of sending her children to the countryside as well as that of selling new products. There are two reasons why the dependents’ storytelling has been undervalued in contrast to those by people such as Zhuang. First, speaking bitterness in order to obtain emotional recognition or material compensation through the work units is no longer effective in the post-Mao and post-SOE period, as discussed by Rofel and myself. Second, mainstream fictional and non-fictional literature and cinema today are obsessed with storytelling

³⁴ Chinese Text: “我没什么文化，不知道怎么讲。”

that is filled with individualistic successes or failures. Therefore, the dominant aesthetic of life stories definitely devalues the everyday complaint style of storytelling. The dependents, undervalued by the political and aesthetic systems, have been perceived as valueless by society. Therefore, the dependents of the lumber mill tend to undervalue their own stories and do not want to tell them.

However, the logging camp dependents, against dominant value systems, are strongly willing to tell their stories to me, a supposed “reporter.” Their ten years of struggle has absolutely contributed to their ability and willingness to talk. Furthermore, the struggle has been a process through which they realized and recognized the value of their own labor, narratives, and lives. Previous working conditions are not merely the source of daily complaint, but a major argument to valorize their previous labor and ask for material and immaterial compensation. The marginalization of the working class in the post-Mao period, the privatization of SOEs, the gendered welfare institutions, and the process of advocacy, all made the logging camp dependents politicized in a way that the state never intended. Their individual everyday stories became the collective narrative that is used for striving for collective interests. Besides, during the process of petition, combining the dominant legal discourse and marginalized “speaking bitterness” storytelling and utilizing them with gendered narrative patterns have become a major strategy of the logging camp worker advocates.

Since 1998, over 1,000 workers of the logging camp have been fighting with local government and the forestry bureau for pensions for the dependents. In the socialist period, the state work units, as the agent of the state, promised to secure workers with “iron bowls” (permanent jobs), and to take care of the workers’ families “from cradle to

grave” (lifelong education, health care, and other basic welfare). During the reform, the state decided to retreat from fully taking care of the workers and started the National Social Security System.³⁵ Since then, according to the labor law, employers have been required to pay the National Social Security Fund for their employees, which makes employees entitled to receive pensions after their retirement.³⁶ The logging camp leadership paid the social security fee only for their state workers, not the dependents, because dependents were not considered “workers.” This information was not available to the workers, and the workers still believed in the state work units’ previous promises, thus dependents did not realize the impact of the logging camp leaders’ behavior until the late 1990s. In 1998, after separately talking with their own logging camp leadership and receiving no response, hundreds of dependents and many of their husbands started petitioning different departments and levels of government. They argued with and sued the local forestry bureau, met city government leadership, talked with the provincial forestry department, and delivered petition letters to the Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Central Committee in Beijing. At last, the local forestry bureau agreed to pay them a monthly allowance in the amount of 320 *yuan* in 2008.

Male workers’ legal knowledge aided their ten-year activism, and the experience of that activism, in turn, depended on the group’s legal knowledge. For instance, Old Miao, whose familiarity with legal provisions I opened this chapter with, did not recite the full names of

³⁵ In 1991, the “Decision on Reform of the Enterprise Employee Retirement Insurance System” (*guanyu qiye zhigong yanglao baoxian zhidu gaige de jue ding*, 关于企业职工养老保险制度改革的决定) was released. This marked the beginning of the National Social Security System.

³⁶ Here, the labor law refers to “The People’s Republic of China Labor Law” (*zhonghua renmin gongheguo laodongfa*, 中华人民共和国劳动法), which was enacted in 1995.

specific laws or quote excerpts of laws like a lawyer. Instead, he cited “the document of 1980,” “the law that was released in 1991,” and “the labor law of 1995,” to argue that the logging camps’ refusal to register the dependents as workers and pay the social security fee for their dependent employees had been illegal. At first, I thought Miao might be a cadre in the logging camp so he had frequent access to the documents and was familiar with the official regulations. However, Miao denied my guess, and then smiled and told me all about his secret efforts. He went to the local library to check the old newspapers; he always kept his eye on government bulletins and went to the library to copy useful sections; he carefully saved the documents that some officials gave the workers when they went to the provincial departments to petition; and he sometimes asked his grandchildren to help with online searching. As I gradually came to understand, he was not the only worker who had learned legal knowledge and archived official documents.

However, the government and the court asserted that the laws the workers were citing did not apply to their situation, because the law had expired, the law was published after the period of their employment, or the country had gone through transitions that made the law inapplicable. The workers lost the lawsuit against the forestry bureau, did not get an active response from any level of government department, and were unable to get answers through formal petition systems. When I asked the men and women workers why they thought they could succeed in pushing the logging camps to pay the allowance, they answered, “Because we kept fighting (*nao*, 闹, literally means ‘making a fuss or noise’) for over ten years.” How is this endurance significant in the logging camp workers’ petition? What has supported them to maintain their effort for so long and not give up?

Speaking bitterness, I argue, acts as a weapon that can produce an effect only with the accumulation of time, and serves an impetus that stimulates a long-term endeavor in the petition. The reiterative act of speaking bitterness let workers solidify their collective identification, understand their own value, and believe in the legitimacy of their activism, all of which maintained their energy through the long journey. Even after the dependents got monthly three-hundred-*yuan* allowances and were forced by the government to sign a contract “stopping petition,” they remained dissatisfied. But as a way to get money first, they signed their names. They showed me the contract in which they promised not to petition any more. I asked whether this meant that they would not petition in future, and they laughed, “How’s that possible? This is just for getting the money as soon as possible. We want to petition, and we will continue. Even though they found out we are continuing, they cannot say we are illegal just because of a contract.”

The long-term battle has dissolved the state’s line of defense in a gradual way. Even though the court and the government managed to find ways to deny the legitimacy of the legal regulations that the workers cited, the individual employees of the court, the forestry bureau, and the city government who personally sympathized with the workers grew skeptical of leaders’ decisions. This skepticism exerted pressure on leaders’ actions. I interviewed a local court employee who took part in the proceeding of the logging camp dependents’ case when they sued the forestry bureau at the local court. He admitted that all of the participating court employees thought the dependents’ request for pensions and post-retirement welfare was reasonable. “All these poor old dependents, they came from Shandong and other places in the 1950s and have worked here for decades. Have you heard about what their jobs were? They worked in the woods

of the mountain, where poisonous snakes and hornets lived. The forestry work was very bitter. However, after so many years of working, they don't even have any pension after retirement now." When I interviewed the court employee, I noticed that he used the same terms and phrases that the dependent workers usually use, including "bitter." So I speculate that he, just like myself, must have listened to the dependents complaint about their previous jobs many times, so that he unconsciously started repeating what he had heard. He likely felt sorry that he could not be helpful: "We also told the forestry bureau people that, 'You can't just ignore these elders. What you are doing is really not reasonable.' But we couldn't help the dependents any more than that. The city government was backing the Forestry Bureau, while we were managed by the city government and we couldn't fight with our boss, so we had to rule against the dependents. But we really did not agree with the Forestry Bureau." The city government was able to save face by letting the Forestry Bureau win the case, but the direct criticism from the court and some negative discussion from the local society after the news of the sentence spread definitely applied social pressure upon the government leaders.

Legal anthropologists observe how law and legal institutions, which constitute a field of contestation subject to various kinds of interpretation and manipulation, are constantly shaped and redefined by citizens' acts (Merry 1990, Yngvesson 1993). For example, in Sally Engle Merry's research, when working-class Americans introduced issues that were not legally significant to the court and were pushed away by the court employees, the plaintiffs either learned more legal jargon to reaffirm the legitimacy of their concerns or became emotional as a form of resistance (1990). The elderly workers in my studies felt powerless facing the logging camp managers and the local government. Thus they turned to the legal institution and attempted

to use law as a tool to assert their request. When they were repeatedly rejected by the government and the court, the male workers learned more legal language to contest the court's interpretation and to reassert the legitimacy of their concerns. In the meantime, the women workers invoked "speaking bitterness" to arouse a societally acceptable moral consciousness in which the government is obligated to take care of the elderly, especially those who underwent difficulties during socialist construction. Elizabeth Perry argues the moral consciousness that holds the state responsible for people's survival is rooted in the history of Chinese society and governance (Perry 2008). In China today, the cultural rhetoric that society and families are responsible for taking care of elders is still strong, in spite of increasing contestations and denials of this responsibility. Moreover, in socialist China, as previously discussed in Zhuang's story, the state played the role of family, using its "socialized motherhood" to manage and take care of individuals' work and living, including elder care. Additionally, the legacy of a socialist ideology that valued labor contributions to the national economy and construction of socialism remains resonant in contemporary China, so many Chinese people still acknowledge the workers' contribution to former state factories. All of these reasons made it possible for the elderly women workers' narratives of speaking bitterness to arouse sympathy.

Recent scholarship on legal consciousness and everyday struggles examines legal consciousness through culturally specific understandings of consciousness and a relational conception of social power. Legal consciousness means "[t]he ways in which the law is experienced and understood by ordinary citizens as they choose to invoke the law, to avoid it, or to resist it" (Ewick and Silbey 1992, 737). Scholars emphasize that legal consciousness develops based on individualized personal experiences; while legal institutions limit individual choices,

individual choices also produce, reproduce, and at times alter institutionalized structures (Ewick and Silbey 1992, McCann and March 1995). My study of elderly Chinese workers' gendered approaches to law and legal institutions demonstrates how workers navigated acquiring and using legal language, resisting institutional denials and invoking a culturally and socio-politically legitimate discourse to affirm their standing. Their legal consciousness was based on personal experiences, which were collectivized through the previous state's institutional construction of gendered labor and literacy. What is most striking in this particular case, I discovered, was how they re-articulated these gendered constructs left over from the previous state's institutionalization, in order to argue against and alter the current institutional structure.

Beyond Rightful Resistance

Appeals to legal and moral consciousness were two tactics the logging camp workers used to approach petitions. In addition, they also made use of the local government's concern over the potential intervention from the central government to achieve their goal. Studying the resistance of rural peasants and the urban lower class, scholars observe similar patterns across different countries, including China, Malaysia, and the US. They find that people innovatively use national laws, central policies, leadership speeches, and appeal to other officially promoted values, combining legal tactics with political pressure to defy local "disloyal" political and economic elites. This phenomenon has been described as "the weapons of the weak" and "rightful resistance" (Scott, 1985; O'Brien and Li, 2006). The logging camp workers' struggle also used the central government as a monitoring and threatening power over the local government. They referred to the central policy, national law, and provincial documents, and they

went to Beijing to get the central government to intervene in their case. Certainly, invisible pressure from the central government affected local elites' decision in China, but how the local elites react to workers who make use of the central power is not predictable. Even in my fieldwork location in Fujian province, I heard of the city government repressing some of the petitioning groups with police violence. Therefore, the logging camp workers attempted to avoid unlawful force or other criminal behavior in order not to weaken their standing or give the government excuse to oppress them with violence.

However, the logging camp workers did not always agree with or merely make use of the central government's promoted value. They often clearly pointed out their different understanding of their own labor and value than the government's understanding, which is beyond the description of "rightful resistance." The official documents of the central and provincial governments indicated that the agenda behind the migration of following women and children in the early 1960s was to "take care of (male) workers' emotional needs and stabilize production." The state declared that the migration of the dependents was the government's gift to the workers' families. The local government interpreted the documents to read that the dependents should be thankful for their jobs and not ask for worker status or welfare. The dependents strongly disagreed with the governments' description of their previous migration and labor experience. They contended that they were mobilized to come because Fujian Province and the local forestry industry needed more laborers. As one interviewee told me, "The second day right after we arrived here, we were taken to the mountains to work. They assigned tasks to us. Each person was required to pick fifty *jin* of twigs and branches. We had to finish our tasks." The dependents angrily said, "How can they not recognize us as workers? Now, when the Forestry

Bureau and the logging camps log trees and sell the wood, they are cutting down and selling the fruits of our labor. We planted all these trees decades ago. Without us dependents working hard and nurturing all the trees, how could they get their current earnings? Now they are enjoying our products, but say we were not ‘workers’ and we don’t deserve pensions; how is that possible?”

The logging camp dependents were assigned to plant and nurture the trees. As their work did not directly produce saleable products, the dependents’ work was a type of reproductive labor for the forests. This type of reproductive labor was devalued and not considered as important as the logging and transporting the state workers did. I believe this is the very reasoning by which the logging camps classified workers and endowed the state workers and dependent workers with differentiated identities and benefits. However, the dependents undoubtedly pointed out the fault of this official logic. They indicated that their reproductive labor was profitable too, although it took decades to realize the products and the profits. By asserting this argument, they revalorized their previous labor. I maintain that the logging camp workers’ petition was essentially a process of revalorization of their own labor and lives.

This process includes all workers’ affirmation of the dependents’ labor contribution to local economy and forestry development, including the male workers’ reference of the legal discourse, and the female dependent workers’ speaking bitterness. The valorizing process is a very gendered narrative performance. By arguing that the workers’ petition is a gendered narrative performance, I highlight that facing the task of negotiation, men and women each perform different roles. The causes of this gendered division of labor are rooted in both internal and external factors. First, the male workers have comparatively higher literacy skills and are able to read diverse documents. Furthermore, as the SOE workers, they attended various factory

meetings and listened to cadre speeches, which made them familiar with the official language and able to use this kind of language to talk with the governmental officials. Therefore, whether for the sake of negotiating with or building connections with the officials, the male SOE workers usually played the major role in networking and arguing their case. On the other hand, the long-term petition has reinforced the narrative pattern of the dependents, particularly in how they speak bitterness, complain about previous logging camp workers, compare themselves with the SOE workers as having no proud workers' identity. When the dependents are arguing for their own pensions, the SOE worker-style narrative of being proud workers and appreciating previous jobs does not serve the dependent workers' agenda. The previous bitterness that they experienced during their labor is the best evidence of their workers' identity as well as the most appealing argument that they deserve pensions.

Which side of the two gendered strategies is more significant? I argue that both are crucial in the logging camp workers' struggle. If there were no legal discourse involved, the dependent workers' "making a fuss" could never attract the attention of the local government and forestry bureau. Dependents would have been stigmatized like the petitioners who could not utilize the national laws or official discourse. However, if they had merely used the official legal discourse in the case of the logging camp vs. the forestry bureau, for example, the local government would have decided the court judgment in the end. In China today, the logging camp workers could hardly promote and realize their ideas by arguing and beating the local governmental department. Under such circumstances, long-term speaking bitterness served as a tool that aroused the sympathy and empathy of the audience, including the officials. This narrative performance gradually dissolved the defense line of the institution, or, to use a

metaphor, dug tunnels into the institution, to persuade it to accept their request. At the same time, within the community, the repetitive narration of the collective past empowered the workers as a group and reinforced their belief in the legitimacy and necessity of their petition.

Conclusion

Centering on life history narratives of elderly forestry women workers, this chapter complicates the understanding of influences of the Maoist gender project on Chinese women. As women who were recruited into the work force under the Maoist political belief that public employment leads to women's liberation, these women workers had diverse ways of situating themselves in their previous state enterprise's community and varying feelings associated with their laboring past. Zhuang portrayed herself as a failed mother to her own children, but a successful social mother to the younger workers in the mill that she managed, and a proud labor contributor to the state economy. My grandmother spoke the bitterness of her widowhood and motherhood to show her loyalty to the socialist state, to gain material support for her family, and to ask for recognition from her family across different political times. Zhuang highlighted and valued her productive work achievements in her life history, while my grandmother and the dependent workers associated their productive labor experience solely with sufferings and the feelings of being unfairly treated and betrayed.

The dependent workers' speaking bitterness of their previous labor experience in the socialist era in China has been doubly marginalized. It has been devalued by the reform period pro-individualized entrepreneurship discourse and unappreciated by the mainstream storytelling aesthetics. Speaking bitterness could not help them gain material compensation and immaterial

recognition from the state as easily as in the socialist era. So when the dependents chose to emphasize their former workers' identity and labor contribution through speaking bitterness, the approach was apparently no longer appropriate for the dominant discourse, just as in Lisa Rofel's analysis of women workers' speaking bitterness. However, the inappropriate approach in fact helped the dependents to penetrate various barriers and realize some of their goals. When speaking bitterness as a technique was used by the party in the rural Land Reform and urban women workers' ideological education, it was meant to solidify their loyalty to the party and the state. Nonetheless, after decades, speaking bitterness has been utilized as a strategy to fight the local government and state discourse in China today. These workers succeeded in pressuring a now neoliberal government to respond by recalling and reiteratively speaking of their labor experience during the socialist era.

The elderly women workers' appropriation of speaking bitterness to fight gender inequality in labor and pension domains challenges the scholarly and popular narrative of Chinese feminist movements. While the reform discourse of human value and mainstream aesthetics of storytelling both marginalized their life stories, the students and writers of Chinese feminist movements underappreciate their activism too. Even though these workers do not identify as feminists (or maybe do not even think about the definition of "feminism" at all), when they talk about the unfair treatment they received as "family dependent" instead of as "women workers" or "female bodies," the issue they are fighting against is a gender-based social injustice. Why is it not possible for the narrative of Chinese feminist movement to include their stories? Are the signifiers the current historiography of Chinese feminist movement seeks to identify as qualified for inclusion too limited? Feminist scholars need to think about how to

change our scope of study so as to not replicate the labor policy's and mainstream discourse's discrimination against these women workers.

Chapter IV: Coming into Differential Consciousness: The Collective Struggle of Lumber Mill Women Workers Fifteen Years after Layoff

At 8:30 a.m. on February 26, 2014, approximately two hundred women—former lumber mill workers—gathered in front of Shunwen City Hall, requesting an audience with the mayor to report a 1998 rights violation that had occurred during the privatization of a formerly state-owned lumber mill.³⁷ Some of the younger women in their fifties were in stylish and colorful clothing, while the older ones, in their eighties, were experiencing difficulty walking. In front of the entrance to city hall, there was a two-lane road with sidewalks on either side. In order to avoid blocking the road or interfering with traffic (and thereby decrease the risk of arrest) the women workers stayed in a loose line on the sidewalk. On the other side of the city hall entrance stood a dozen police officers, preventing workers from entering the building, and preparing to take action if necessary.

The workers passed around a collective statement to ask for signatures (or fingerprints, as some older workers were illiterate). They recalled the last time, fifteen years earlier, when the group had been asked to sign their names—a time of layoffs when privatization was just beginning at the lumber mill. Back then they were required to sign a severance agreement (*maiduan tongyishu*, 买断同意书). The agreement indicated that by signing workers whose employment was to be terminated would receive compensation from the lumber mill. Depending

³⁷ This opening story is based on events I witnessed during my fieldwork and conversations I had with the individuals involved.

on how long they had worked for the factory, workers received severance in the amount of 3000 to 4000 *yuan*. Once compensated, according to the agreement, workers would have no relationship with the mill. The jobs were gone, and with them the right to demand further compensation or other support from the factory at which they had worked for decades. Zeng Nanjin, one of the protest leaders, recalled that she did not want to sign the contract in 1998. Enterprise leaders had threatened the employment of her husband, who also worked at the lumber mill, leaving them with no choice but to agree to the contract. Yet when the lumber mill was fully privatized in 2000, her husband lost his job anyway. Zeng's difficult sacrifice was not enough to save her husband's job in the face of nationwide enterprise privatization.

As they passed around and signed the statement, some workers also read it aloud and talked with each other. "That's right! Our collective factory had so many assets and we even had a plot of land. Both have been sold by the officials (当官的). But we were so foolish that we never fought." The crowd became increasingly agitated and resentful, and started yelling, "We want to meet the mayor!" However, they lacked the preparation and experience to synchronize their chanting for the demonstration. The leaders started yelling, but the followers could not keep the rhythm. The disjointedness made the scene slightly humorous, yet did not make the group any less passionate or confident.

The group positioned ten eighty-year-old grandmothers to stand at the front of the demonstration. The leaders, who had asked me to document the demonstration said, "You go to the front to film. See if they (the police) dare to touch the elders." Through my camera, I saw the grandmothers talking to the young officers, explaining that they wanted to meet the mayor, pushing forward as they spoke. The young police officers, who appeared to be in their early

twenties, did not push back with substantive force. They stood still, attempting to block the workers, but none of the officers wanted to risk hurting the eighty-year-old grandmas. The officers' predicament and reluctance to act made them look awkward. Gradually, the grandmas pushed through the police cordon, allowing the group to squeeze through the entrance of city hall after an hour and a half of demonstrating.

Although these women were laid-off in 1998, they did not begin protesting until 2014. The relationship between the laid-off workers and this lengthy interval struck me as particularly interesting. It was as if they had spent fifteen years in preparation. The interval reflected a temporal lag between historical processes of structural transition and the mobilization of consciousness and collective actions. Two popular Chinese sayings cited by the workers both help make sense of how they relate to time and explain the lag between the layoffs and the start of the protests. The first is: "Everything we believed when we were fifteen, we don't believe now we are fifty." This line emphasizes that society and mainstream ideology have changed significantly in the last thirty to forty years, when the reform took place in China in all kinds of aspects. The second is: "people can live thirty years on the east side of the river, and thirty years on the west" (三十年河东, 三十年河西). The workers said this often when addressing how they understood their transition from "state owners" in socialist China to workers with temporary jobs and hard lives. This old Chinese saying, which communicates that people have good years and bad years, indicates the workers' understanding of the precarity of their lives and work across time. It is not that they considered socialism a good time, with the transition to capitalism and neoliberalism sending them into a difficult one; but that their lives have been always unstable, and the ones who controlled their lives were not themselves, but the state, the policy,

and the economy. The saying also indicates that good times and bad times are neither fixed nor separated, but can be interchanged or mixed at certain times and in certain situations, including moments of protest.

Beginning at the end of the 1970s, the Chinese government began implementing changes across a wide array of government institutions, ranging from labor relations and social welfare systems to market and legal regulations.³⁸ The multi-step processes of transition in these areas were coupled with a simultaneous process of ideological transition in the country. Although this ideological transition had already been underway when the layoffs occurred in 1998, the year was significant for workers in terms of fundamental changes to their worker status and welfare entitlement. What, then, made 2014 a turning point that prompted these workers' decision to join in collective struggle? Why and how did these women workers come together fifteen years after their layoffs? This chapter analyzes gendered and class-based labor relations in the formerly state-owned lumber mill alongside individual second-generation/laid-off workers' experiences, and explores how these influences shaped the laid-off workers' re-employment and life strategies after their layoffs. I then discuss two phases of the workers' protest, beginning in January 2014. While at first both male and female lumber mill workers participated, during and after February 2014, only the women workers continued the protests. Through participant observation, I was able to observe closely how women workers mobilized and utilized diverse discourse, resources, and allies in their collective struggle. I argue that the labor relations in the previously state-

³⁸ A popular saying in China, "In the 1970s Chairman Mao told us to go down to the countryside. In the 1980s Chairman Deng told us to jump into the ocean (i.e. go into business). In the 1990s Chairman Jiang told us to step down from our posts (i.e. we were fired)." (七十年代毛主席叫我们下乡，八十年代邓主席叫我们下海，九十年代江主席叫我们下岗。)

owned factory, reform-era discourses of labor and gender, and diverse institutional inequalities all oppressed former state factory women workers in their daily lives and work. However despite these oppressions, the women were able to creatively utilize a discourse of justice from the socialist period in conjunction with newly reformed legal arguments from the post-socialist era, to open the space necessary to express demands and valorize their labor contributions—culminating, ultimately, in the achievement of their protest goals.

Feminized Collective-Owned Enterprise (集体所有制企业)

In the late 1970s, after abandoning the Maoist strategy for economic development, the Chinese government initiated new labor policies concerning hiring, payment, and incentives. Under these new policies, both the seniority-based model of the pre-1966 era and the politicized virtuocratic model of the Cultural Revolution decade were replaced by a meritocratic recruitment and promotion system.³⁹ However, the transition was neither abrupt nor straightforward. In the 1980s, recruitment was often mixed, with a meritocratic approach of selecting employees by examination as well as an ascriptive approach of hiring the children of employees (Shirk 1981). The compromise between the state's and the factory's desire for higher productivity and the pressure on factory leaders from their employees to hire the employees' children resulted in a new type of urban enterprise, the State-Owned Enterprise (SOE)-affiliated Collective-Owned Enterprise (COE) (国营带集体企业). In order to decrease the state's expenditures on workers, some of the heavy industries (including forestry) were not permitted to expand after the late

³⁹ The virtuocratic model in the Cultural Revolution employed political/moral criteria in its selection and promotion. Meritocratic selection followed rational bureaucratic principles and employed academic examinations.

1970s, and the labor quotas of state factory workers were fixed by the central or provincial governmental departments that managed the factories. Therefore, the SOE-affiliated COEs were founded to hire children of the SOE employees. But the COEs provided their workers with lower salaries, housing, and other benefits than those included in the compensation packages of state factory employees.⁴⁰

As part of this transition, the Shunwen state-owned lumber mill established its affiliated COE, named “wood processing mill” (木制品厂). During the Cultural Revolution, some lumber mill employees’ children were sent to rural areas. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, around one hundred of them stayed in the villages. They and their parents hoped they could come back to work in the city soon, and thus the lumber mill leaders felt strong pressure to start a collective factory to provide jobs for the children. In the meantime, among the first-generation family dependent-workers (家属工), some wanted to register as regularized “workers” in the system. At that time, the state did allow some state factories that “had capacity” (有能力) to establish collective factories based on their existing “family dependent production team” (家属生产队). The old workers told me that although the province passed down a document to the enterprises, processing the application and registration still required special effort from the leaders. In contrast with the lumber, the logging camps did not start collective enterprises based on their large family dependent worker groups. Their dependent workers were spread out in work sites throughout the mountains. Their working location is not in a fixed one, like a workshop, but

⁴⁰ These factories set up by state factories were also called “big collective factories”(大集体厂) in order to differentiate them from “small collective factories” (小集体厂). Those COEs were operated by neighborhoods and managed by the Second Ministry of Light Industry.

mobile. According to the official rule, a fixed workplace is required for the work unit to apply to transfer their family dependent team into a collective enterprise. Moreover, the leaders of the logging camps did not care enough to navigate the system to give a try for their dependent workers. Hence the ten-year petition discussed in the Chapter Three.

Fortunately, the lumber mill's family dependent-workers' team leader Wu did make the extra effort to begin transferring the team to a collective factory. Her husband was the manager (厂长) of the state-owned lumber mill, and thus she had access to important information and networks. She went to the provincial capital and county government offices several times to process the transfer. What is worth pointing out is that her effort could not have been successful without the assets that the family dependent-workers' team had already accumulated. According to a grandmother who attended the demonstration in the city hall, "We had one million yuan at that time!" Because the family dependent workers' team had enough funding to start a collective factory, which was required by the state, they were able to establish a collective factory with the assistance (money, machines, and administration) from the state factory. In short, the collective factory of the lumber mill was a product generated from the compromise between the state and the local enterprise, the negotiation between the factory and the workers, as well as the resources from both the state-owned lumber mill and the previous family dependent-workers' team.

How did the workers experience the differences and connection between the SOE and the COE? First of all, workers' status was noticeably gendered. According to a factory document, in 1990 70% of SOE workers were male, while 80% of COE workers were female. This is mostly because of the gendered inheritance of workers' status. Because of the "replacement" (顶替, 补员) policy, the SOE guaranteed a job to one child of every retiring employee, a policy which

excluded family dependent-workers. Most of the SOE workers let their sons use this quota. There were other ways to secure an SOE job position, including serving in the military for a couple of years, which usually only applied to men. Hence, women workers had to inherit their mothers' positions in the family dependent-workers' team or in the collective unit after it was formed. So by the 1990s, when first-generation workers retired, their sons became workers of the SOE and their daughters became workers of the COE.

The wage scales of collective factory workers were only one to two yuan lower at each grade than state factory equivalents, and their welfare provisions, including health insurance, were the same as those of state workers. Thus, though the income and welfare gaps were small, the status gap remained. The worker community considered the COE workers "second-class citizens." The COE workers felt "lower than other people in terms of status" (低人一等), and they were not perceived to be as good as SOE workers for marriage matches. Most of the lumber mill workers married within their community. SOE male workers could marry either SOE or COE female workers, however most SOE female workers preferred to marry their SOE counterparts. Therefore, the male COE workers were seen as the lowest rank in the marriage market within the lumber mill, and often needed to find partners outside the factory.

The gendered differences in workers' status that had once been concealed by similar monthly salaries and benefits before the enterprise privatization, were revealed and reinforced after the privatization reform. The collective workers were laid off first in 1998, while the state workers were not laid off later until 2000 and 2001. The state workers, depending on how many years they had worked for the lumber mill, received layoff compensation fees of 20,000 yuan on average; however, the collective workers only had layoff compensation fees around 3000 to 4000

yuan. The job market became harsher for middle-aged laid-off women workers in the 1990s, with local industrial factories preferring to hire young rural migrant workers because of their purported docility and hardworking nature. While the working conditions of the industrial factories have generally proven worse for all workers, young rural migrants were seen as better adapted to a labor market with more labor rights violations, including no stable contracts, no benefits paid, delayed salary payment, wage theft, irregular work scheduling, and other abuses.

Shunwen witnessed the establishment of many privately owned small-size workshops (less than ten employees, producing small bamboo products, etc.) and medium-size mills (ten to one hundred employees, producing furniture, chemical products, etc.) in the early 2000s. In the meantime, like many fourth-tier counties in China, the service industry in Shunwen simultaneously experienced a rapid development in the mid-1990. The laid-off male workers, if they had previously worked as electricians, technicians, or drivers, could still find jobs in newly emerging private factories. But their female equivalents were not as lucky. They were rejected for jobs, including restaurant and hotel positions, because they were seen as lacking sexual beauty capital. They could only work backstage in the service industry, washing dishes or cleaning hotel rooms. Thus the gendered division of labor before and after the enterprise privatization made women far less advantaged in their post-layoff reemployment.

Many SOE and COE workers were married couples, so when they got laid-off, they suffered in the new financial landscape as a nuclear family. Often, their siblings' families were laid off simultaneously, since most of the second-generation workers were the children of the first-generation workers. Therefore, in spite of different layoff and post-layoff situations that male and female workers encountered, the extended families of laid-off workers often suffered.

Furthermore, the second-generation workers, no matter whether they held SOE or COE status, grew up as the children of the first-generation workers together in the neighborhood of the lumber mill. After they started working for the lumber mill, they worked and lived in the same space. When laid off, many of their experiences were shared as well. The SOE and COE laid-off workers thus became a collective who shared similar class status, lived experiences, and post-layoff difficulties. According to the COE workers: “We all have strong affective links to the big factory” (我们都对大厂很有感情). Their relation to their work unit was not only an employee to a work place, but also to a history where all family members work and live together, building a mill and a community together. This affective attachment has been a resource for the protests of both the elderly logging camp workers and the middle-aged lumber mill workers. So when the lumber mill workers protested for the first time on January 26th, 2014, the SOE and COE workers, both male and female, participated together as a collective body with a shared identity. But after that action the SOE workers stepped back, for reasons explained below, while the COE women workers took over the fight. Thus when the protest in front of Shunwen City Hall occurred in February, the COE women workers were the only participants.

The Re-Identification as Collective Workers

When the lumber mill was privatized around 2000, its four major workshops were separately taken over by four privately owned wood product enterprises. The new privately owned enterprises purchased the buildings and assembly lines of the factory workshops. They also signed leases with the city government and thus had long-term (fifty-year) rights to use the plots of the land. Since around 2005, the Chinese central government initiated a policy called

“Leave the City and Enter the Industrial Zone (退城进园),” which started in major cities and spread into smaller cities and towns, demanding that industrial factories move from urban area into specialized industrial zones in suburban or rural areas. In 2011 and 2012, the four new privately owned wood product enterprises relocated their factories from their original location, where the state-owned lumber mill had been, into the new suburban industrial zone. The city government announced its intention to sell the abandoned land to real estate developers, and the city government and the enterprise owners planned to receive 60% and 40% of the revenue respectively. In late 2013 and early 2014, the former lumber mill workers heard about the land sale and that its estimated revenue would be as high as tens of billions of Chinese *yuan*.

On January 26, 2014, a loosely organized group of men and women workers gathered in front of one of the main entrances of the privatized lumber mill. They locked the factory’s door and quickly blocked the public road to enforce their demand to meet the government officials. They were able to see two representatives from the city government. They told the representatives that they believed their former decades of contribution to the establishment and development of the lumber mill should count, and that they thus deserved part of the land sale revenue. The workers talked about the history of how the old workers and their families had built the factory together and how generations of the workers’ families had lived on this land and contributed to the labor production on this land. After listening to the workers’ requests, the representatives “kindly” promised to look into the issue and respond to the workers later. However, the day after the workers’ demonstration, one of the middle-aged male workers was arrested of the crime of endangering public security. The government repeatedly avowed their intention to investigate, but did nothing. This “carrot and stick strategy” quickly suppressed the

lumber mill workers.

When they first demonstrated, there was no clear boundary between the SOE and COE workers. As already mentioned, the SOE and COE workers were intertwined in terms of their work and living space, family ties, and shared experience. So the SOE workers and the COE workers did not know that their different worker status mattered in the protest. When the workers met with government representatives on January 26th, they were not well organized. The ten or so workers in that meeting did not have a pre-agreed upon demand. Instead, they talked about diverse issues in their speeches, including the land sale, the post-layoff treatment, and the ongoing housing problems of some workers. One of the first-generation male workers mentioned that a plot of land along the river was filled and built by the collective workers in the early 1980s. The land was used for storage and production by the lumber mill afterwards. He said: “Collective workers, the land along the river is your land, you all should fight to have it back!” That was the point when the COE workers started thinking about how their identities and related material conditions differed from the state workers.

The January 26th demonstration took place four days before the 2014 Lunar New Year. During the New Year’s vacation, the collective women workers ran into and chatted with each other about what they had heard from the demonstration meeting. The fact that the workers lived together in the danwei-attached residential neighborhood allowed the news to spread more easily. They gradually reached an agreement that this might be a good opportunity for them to reclaim their assets and ask for more compensation. The workers’ social and kinship connections and the mutual trust that they built through their previous collective living and working experience were catalysts for achieving this agreement. I call this process of meeting with each other and realizing

an agreement a re-identification of the collective workers. During this process they consulted friends and acquaintances who worked for real estate developers and who were lawyers. Based on their advice, the women did some further research online. They figured out two major supporting legal provisions. First, the “People’s Republic of China Urban Collective-Owned Enterprise Regulations” protected the COE workers’ collective ownership of COE’s production materials and accumulated assets. That is to say, the ownership of a COE is based on the workers’ labor.⁴¹ Second, it was known that in the PRC the state owns urban land, while peasant collectives own the rural land. But less well known was that *urban* collective-owned land existed, and was actually owned by the collective as well. In the case of a COE, people who worked for it are the owners of the COE’s land. Some of the women workers, particularly the five leaders, recalled the assets the COE owned, wrote collective petitions, and collected individual collective workers’ signatures and fingerprints. During this process, the collective workers’ identity was reinforced and differentiated from the state workers. Finally, on the morning of February 26th, as described at the beginning of this chapter, a lumber mill collective women workers’ demonstration occurred in front of city hall.

After the women workers jostled with the police officers and flooded into the city hall, they were unable to find the mayor’s office in the main building of city hall. Apparently, city hall planners intentionally excluded the location of mayor’s office from the sign that indicated office room numbers. So forty women protesters gathered in a random conference room, loudly proclaiming a request to meet the mayor. An hour later, the Forestry Bureau director, acting as

⁴¹ Refer to book 党的基本路线知识全书, edited by 翟泰丰, 顾龙生, 宋贵仑, and 宋玉平 (1994), 辽宁人民出版社。

the representative of city government came and talked with them. He appeared unconcerned and started confidently stating the lumber mill's history in order to show his good understanding of and capacity for managing the current situation. He asserted that since the COE was built by the SOE, and thus by the state, as a way to assign jobs to the employees' children, the COE's assets belonged to the state, and the workers did not have the right to argue for it.

However, the women workers, particularly the five leaders, quickly pointed out the problems of the director's argument. They said they could have agreed with the director that the COE was not different from the SOE, considering that the collective workers and state workers labored in the same factory and contributed to the lumber mill and the state in the same way. However, when the lumber mill became privatized, the collective workers were scapegoated, forcibly laid off with much less compensation. Because the lumber mill did not pay the Social Security for the collective workers, the collective workers received only around an 800-yuan pension every month, which was one third of what the state workers received on average. The collective workers made their point clear: "If you think we have no difference from the state workers, pay us back the Social Security and keep our pension as high as our state worker equivalents. If not, recognize that our positions are different than those of the state workers, and admit that we were collective workers, and our unit was a COE, which was legally categorized and regulated in a different way." After saying that, they started reading "People's Republic of China Urban Collective-Owned Enterprise Regulations" to support their arguments to reclaim ownership over the land and buildings of their previous work units. They also read aloud their collective petition: "...Depending on our temporary job income, which was extremely low, we have managed to sustain ourselves until now. We suffered without complaint, believing in the

party and the government. But today, all of us workers are shocked and devastated, and our anger is finally breaking out. We found that our assets were sold during privatization in 2000, in secret and at a low price....” As mentioned above, the collective workers had known for a long time that the assets had been sold, but what they did *not* know was that they had rights to fight to retrieve them. So when they said they were “shocked and devastated,” the phrase expressed strong emotion. Actually, the people who were really “shocked”, I argue, were the Forestry Bureau director and a vice mayor who arrived half an hour after the director. Their facial expressions and silence demonstrated that they had not heard of this legal provision before, and thus did not know how to respond to the workers’ argument. Seeing the awkwardness of the director and vice mayor, the women workers became more confident and raised their voices, collectively yelling: “We want our assets back!” The Forestry Bureau director and the vice mayor had to agree to build a “special case investigation group” to look into this case. Then, the women workers succeeded in forcing them to sign a promise to start the investigation the next day and allow the worker leaders to monitor and fully participate in the investigation.

China’s postsocialist transition places some of the discourses that the current socio-political institutions follow in contradiction with certain ideological beliefs inherited from the Maoist legacy. This kind of contradiction created a dilemma and institutional barrier for the petitioning workers. As promised, a special investigation group was founded by the city government to look into the COE’s case, and the five leading women workers participated in the investigation process. They went to the Forestry Bureau office every day to ask for updates and push for action. They also asked the Forestry Bureau to open the archive of the former COE to go through the documents and account books to look for information and evidence. They met

with the government officials and a lawyer the city government assigned to “offer them legal consultation.” As a lobbyist for the local government, the lawyer actually tried more to persuade the women workers to give up their struggle than he did to support the action. After one of the meetings with the lawyer and Forestry Bureau vice-director, the lead worker-activists became frustrated. They could not stop complaining: “It’s already been over a month. They [the officials] are still trying to brush us off. The lawyer is totally on their side too and was sent to patronize us. He is a lawyer, but when we talked about legal regulations with him, he told us to think about the particularity of the history. However, when we discuss the history of the factory, he started switching to address the institutional difficulties in legal regulation.” When the workers cited the legal provisions, the lawyer told them that these provisions were either too early to consider what happened during the reform, or too new to apply to what happened before its issue. He asked the workers to think about the special transition of China, to think about the fact that the concept of “ownership” and Property Law were both new to the PRC’s history, and thus could not apply to the collective factories.⁴² Nevertheless, when the workers asked him to consider the history of the lumber mill and highlighted one of their requests to have pensions equal to those of the state workers, the lawyer told them that the collective workers had been recognized as non-state workers by the institution, which was unchangeable, even if it was a mistake.

When Kimberlé Crenshaw first described the analytical framework of “intersectionality” in her 1989 article, she cited the lawsuit *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*. Five black women workers were laid off by a car manufacturing company, but the court rejected the plaintiffs’

⁴² “People’s Republic of China Property Rights Law” (中华人民共和国物权法) was passed on 2007.

attempt to bring a suit on behalf of black women because black women are not “a special class to be protected from discrimination.” They could bring a lawsuit based on racial discrimination or gender discrimination, but not a combination of the two. The laid-off collective women workers in my research faced a similar dilemma. But their dilemma emerged at the intersection of China’s socialist history and postsocialist legal transformation. Very powerful was that the women workers, like Crenshaw, has clearly articulated the intersectional limitation in their meetings with the governmental officials many times. They directly pointed out that the government created a dilemma for them, and pushed the government to choose either the socialist discourse of justice or the post-socialist legal framework. When they articulated the dilemma between these two dominant discourses, they also rejected the government’s intention to define the history as a linear timeline, in which socialist discourse appears as something only prevalent in the past and thus inapplicable to workers in the reform era, while the post-socialist law inapplicable to the case before the reform. According to the legal reform, the former “second-class citizen” collective workers, currently had greater bargaining power than the state workers to reclaim their assets and ask for more compensation. The women workers therefore re-identified as collective workers and claimed that the legal discourse should translate this identity to their collective ownership. The process of re-identification actually occurred during their battle with the city government and their learning of the shifting of the prioritized value of the hierarchical institutions, particularly law and legal institutions. In the following paragraphs, I will give a close examination of the workers’ choice of using legal discourse.

The Stigmatized Laid-off Workers and Impossibility of Speaking Bitterness

In Chapter Three, I describe how the first-generation logging camp workers fought for the women workers' pensions and how their strategy involved a gendered division of labor., with male workers making legal arguments and female workers using the Maoist tactic of speaking bitterness. In the end, the women workers' speaking bitterness obtained sympathy from court and city government employees. The opinions of the people within the institution created peer pressure for the government's leadership, and culminated in the decision to give the women workers monthly allowances. In fact, when the lumber-mill collective women workers started protesting, they also used the practice of speaking bitterness in their speech and collective statements. But why, we may inquire, did they end up using only legal discourse, hiding their worker's identity and labor experience? It is not only because they preferred to use institutional regulation as a backing power, but also because they knew that their previous labor experience was not valued as much as the first-generation workers' labor contribution to the socialist state. In addition, the laid-off workers had been constructed by the reform discourse as lazy, unproductive, and "eating out of the big-pot rice" (吃大锅饭). Their work in the previous state and collective units had not been considered worth mentioning, or was even deemed shameful to discuss.

I have observed how the laid-off workers' desire to talk about post-layoff suffering, recall their good years of working for state and collective units, and compare experience in previous work units and current privatized enterprises, was constantly suppressed. When they talked about these issues in a workplace, the boss and other workers would make fun of them and look down upon them, criticizing them as "those losers who have got used to being lazy and cannot adapt to

the social change.” The dominant discourse in the reform China describes the reform as a progressive, linear development, in which the state economy made big progress and people are expected to catch up with this progress; otherwise, they would be left out, and they deserve to be left out. When the laid-off workers talked about the issues at family dinners, other family members would persuade them “not to think about these useless things.” Once a male laid-off worker complained that his factory had not paid his salary for two months, would not pay his Social Security or medical insurance, and that the working environment was too dirty. He said he did not want to work there anymore. His sister was shocked: “You want to change work *again*? You just changed your job two months ago. You didn’t like your previous jobs either. Can’t you wait? If you quit now, you will not get your salary back.” His wife added: “Right! Now every job is like this. Where can you find a job that pays your Social Security and medical insurance? YOU ARE NOT WORKING FOR A STATE FACTORY ANYMORE! If you don’t want this one, and don’t want that one either, how can you find a job?” His wife’s comments reflected a widespread phenomenon that most of the factories violated the workers’ rights in the job market after reform. Instead of self-defending their own rights, the workers were supposed to adapt to the new job market and bad working conditions as a way to catch up with the progress of the reform. She continued: “You look at me. I’m a woman. After the layoff, how many kinds of work have I done? I’m working for a chemical factory now. What a toxic and dangerous environment! I don’t even complain. How can you, a ‘big man,’ complain so much?” Men are seen as the “breadwinners” of the families and supposed to take the responsibility of financially supporting the families. As a result, women were discriminated against by the reform job market and paid less, while men encounter pressure to endure whatever sufferings to earn family wage. The

reemployment pressure and stigmatization of laid-off workers pit women and men against each other in similar fashion.

The reform discourse in China treated the labor problem more as a gender issue than a class one. In her ethnographic fieldwork on a state enterprise under the privatizing process in 2003, Yang Jie observed a so-called “crisis of masculinity.” Understood to be primary breadwinners, laid-off men tended to become extremely depressed and to engage in desperate behaviors when unemployed. In response, local government and enterprise leaders adopted an empathetic and supportive attitude, managing the class-based labor unrest with means that focus on gender roles and family concerns. Male workers were aware of this tactic too, and used this official assumption or language related to a “masculinity crisis” to achieve their goals, mostly reemployment opportunities or higher compensation fees (Yang 2010). I agree with Yang that some unemployment pressures were more associated with the male more than the female workers, especially in ideological and emotional terms, as in the example recounted in the previous paragraph. In fact, however, since the 1990s women have been disproportionately targeted for layoffs. A 1997 survey shows that women constituted 62.8% of laid-off workers (Wang 2003). Chinese official media outlets often portrayed women laid-off workers who were reemployed in the service industry as “reemployment stars” (Dai 2004; Yang 2007). Making laid-off men into “crisis of masculinity” and making laid-off women into “reemployment stars” were the state’s tactics to turn the problem of massive unemployment into a privatized gendered issue and thus to downplay class in the dominant discourse.

The laid-off forestry workers’ daily narrative echoes this state-initiated discourse. Besides assuming that men need to be tougher and more tolerant of the brutal work environment

to secure their jobs, a lot of laid-off workers attributed the increasing divorce rate in the laid-off workers' community to unemployment. When they analyzed why a couple got divorced, for example, they would say, because the wife started her own restaurant business and did well, while her husband could not find a decent job to earn as much as she: "Of course, they would get divorced. This kind of divorce and family breakdown happened a lot in our factory." They told me about the impact of enterprise privatization on the couples with sadness for the men and a mixture of condemnation and understanding for the women. The privatization made the male breadwinners lose their jobs, and some of them were not able to take the responsibility of raising the whole family, or even had to depend on their wives. As Yang argues, over-focusing on gender issues and the influences of the reform on the families shifts the workers' community away from class analysis to understand layoff policy and privatization reform. The privatization transferred a formerly prestigious group to an almost urban underclass status in post-Mao China, however in workers' community, the voices of blaming individuals not tolerating the bad labor conditions and the regretful feeling for the families "not be able to stick together through the difficulty" were way more than a useful class analysis. The policies and discourse of labor and value after the privatization attempted to remake the state workers, both male and female, into entrepreneurial subjects, who did not complain about the capitalist construction of class inequalities, but rather about a community of people who "fail" under the myth of meritocracy.

In the reform period, the *suzhi* (quality) has been used by China's neoliberal government as a means of differentiating the value of human bodies. As a value coding system, *suzhi* highlights gaps between kinds with value and kinds "lacking." By marking the body of the urban middle class as high *suzhi* and the site of self-development and accumulation, while the body of

the rural migrant as low *suzhi* and incapable of self-discipline, *suzhi* discourse serves to justify the exploitation of the “derogated” body of the rural migrant, as well as to reinforce social inequality in China (Yan 2008). Tomba (2009) holds that as one of the “vulnerable groups” portrayed by public propaganda, laid-off workers, together with people “outside of the system” and “rural migrant workers” are considered incapable of representing and cultivating themselves; in other words, having low-*suzhi*.

I argue, rather, that the laid-off workers are in fact *excluded* from the *suzhi* discourse in post-socialist China. The creation of this specific form of neoliberal personhood is central to the post-socialist transition. In the socialist economy, a worker’s value cannot be measured without situating them into their political, moral, kinship, and social networks. In post-socialist countries, the restructuring of the corporate attempts to objectify workers with measurable individual value. It cuts them loose from their formerly sustaining networks in order to be able to measure, monitor, and regulate individual workers’ productivity. In *Privatizing Poland*, Dunn (2004) claims that just as the capitalist accounting system cannot measure the value of a former state enterprise in socialist Eastern Europe, the capitalist accounting system cannot value workers who live through a socialist era. Accordingly, we can see the inability of *suzhi* to measure the value of former state workers in China. The body of the laid-off worker has been the location of impossibility and can only be associated with the past tense of socialist China. Although the rural migrant workers cannot achieve high *suzhi*, they can gain productivity through endless labor practice. The bodies of rural migrant workers are disposable in the current or future tense, but the bodies of the laid-off workers have already been disposed of in the past. Discursively, their labor experience only happened in the state factories, which is not valuable and shameful to mention.

Back to the question earlier: why can the first-generation state workers perform speaking bitterness, but not the second-generation/laid-off ones? The construction of labor across the two generations of state workers are quite different inside and outside the worker's community. Most people still recognize and highly value the contribution of the old-generation workers to China's socialist construction, and think the workers at that time had very different ideology than people hold now. The first-generation state workers are understood to be pure, noble, hard-working, and self-sacrificing. But people, including some of the laborers who have themselves lost employment, often consider laid-off workers to be uneducated, low-skilled, lazy, "eating out of the big-pot rice," and purposefully making a fuss in order to earn money without working. This narrative has stigmatized and marginalized the second-generation state workers, and thus garnered societal support for the state's enterprise privatization and layoff program, a program which is, in effect, a nationwide invasive unemployment program, starting around 2000. This, then, is the reason that second-generation state workers are not able to obtain sympathy through speaking bitterness regarding their previous work in state factories.

It is worth pointing out that the discursive construction of the laid-off workers is closely related to the state's agenda of making use of rural migrant labor. This strategy of pitting two laboring bodies against each other has been seen in Chinese history and shown in my earlier chapters many times. Urban state workers, as a heroic and prestigious group within Maoist socialism, once felt entitled to bargain with management for jobs and benefits. Such entitlement made them a less docile and thus less easily manipulated, qualified, and exploitable labor force than rural migrant workers in the new labor market. Making the state workers lose support and thus become powerless in bargaining or labor resistance enabled the state to easily replace their

expensive labor with the rural migrant workers' cheap and vulnerable labor.

In fact, at the individual level, the laid-off workers have diverse attitudes towards the layoff and privatization program. Some of them follow the individualized success narrative, and attribute a person's "victory" or "failure" to their individual effort. Such people seldom show sympathy for their fellow laid-off workers who are enduring difficulties, and claim that "despite all people getting laid-off, only those who were lazy and unenterprising end up miserably." But some people, especially Lina, one of the leading protesters, show their disagreement with this individual success vs. failure ideology, and show empathy with members of laid-off groups. Lina once told me that she thought the state and the society disposed of the laid-off workers so as to accumulate capital for some of the higher-class groups, and that this was extremely unethical. She said: "The state and the society dumped us laid-off workers. We accumulated so many assets with our hard work, and now they have all been used to feed the rich and the officials. They now just ignore us. So unethical!"⁴³ She admitted that as one of the laid-off workers, she felt antagonism to the state and to society. "Every time when I think about this, I feel very angry. I feel the whole society and the state owe us laid-off workers so much!" Lina's comments illustrate an individualized narrative of class antagonism. Her feeling of resentment was not isolated from the Chinese societal transformation and in fact quite commonly-witnessed in today's China.

However, the collective narrative of the laid-off women workers is different from individual ones; or, put differently, the collective narrative does not reflect all individual thoughts. When workers functioned as a protesting collective, they needed to utilize a language

⁴³ Her original text is: 国家和社会就这样把我们下岗工人抛弃了。当年我们辛苦积累起来的资产喂饱了那么多有钱人和当官的，而他们就这么不管我们了，这么缺德！我每次想起来都觉得非常愤怒，觉得整个社会和国家都欠了我们下岗工人的。

that could impose a moral obligation on the institution to fulfill their demands. Therefore, in the beginning, their collective statement, the one used in the negotiation on the February 26th demonstration, was full of storytelling of post-layoff sufferings. But this kind of storytelling appeared less and less in later speeches and meetings, and was gradually replaced by the legal rights discourse. In one of the mobilizing meetings, Lina held a photocopy of the legal provisions in her right hand. After she read the legal provisions that protect collective workers' assets, she waved her right hand and said loudly and in an agitated tone: "Did you all hear? This is our *right!* It cannot be violated by anyone. How can the government intervene and sell *our* land and assets? We want to fight back for our assets!" In private, Lina told me she actually did not believe in the legal system and did not think the current law promotes justice. But as a group leader, she nevertheless insisted and relied on legal provisions as the major supporting discursive resource.

During the protest and negotiation, Lina was angered by the unequal institution many times. During their April 2014 interaction with the Social Security Department in Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian, the collective workers argued for a pension equal to that of the state workers. The staff told them that the computational system had set them at a lower level with a lower calculating index, which could not be changed. The workers attempted to argue for equal treatment by telling the staff that they worked in the same factories and positions as the state workers, and that they believed that the social security system should treat people equally. One of the middle-aged staff laughed at them and said, "Don't be naive. Humans are not equal. Just accept it, accept the reality. Why don't you go back to participate in the street dancing, just like normal middle-aged women? Keeping healthy is more important than fighting for something that

doesn't exist. Don't make yourselves too angry. If you get a heart attack or some other bad influence on your bodies, it's not worth it." Lina called me right after their meeting with the Social Security Department. She was angry. For her, the statement of people being unequal was ridiculous and incomprehensible: "I can't believe the government officials can say these kinds of words!" She was obviously astonished.

Growing up in the reform era, I have already heard about, experienced, and gotten used to institutional inequalities. After my parents got laid-off from the lumber mill, my family migrated to Xiamen, a large coastal city in Fujian. Because I did not have a Xiamen *hukou* (registrant of household), my family had to pay a substantial special fee in order for me to be allowed to study in a senior high school there. While I do not agree with the institutional inequalities, I would not be surprised to hear such a statement. So I was surprised by the shock that Lina felt when she heard a casual statement affirming inequality. In other words, I was surprised that after so many years of experiencing layoffs and reemployment, she still felt astonished when government officials asserted these institutional inequalities. When I talked with the laid-off worker protesters, I often found it hard to understand how much they had adapted to post-reform ideology, and how much they still believed in socialist equality rhetoric. With their lives separated and divided by China's socialist and reform periods, I often find their beliefs mixed with diverse and conflicting consciousnesses.

Rightful Resistance

In their protest, the lumber mill women workers innovatively used national laws, central policies, party documents, provincial regulations, leadership speeches, and other officially

promoted values, combining legal tactics with political pressure, to defy “disloyal” elites in the local government. In the meantime, they avoided unlawful force or other criminal behavior, in order to avoid weakening their standing. When McCann (1994) analyzed how women workers in the United States employed legal strategies and collective action to press for wage reform, he found a similar phenomenon. This type of resistance can appear in many settings, and research by Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang (2006) in rural China led them to name it “rightful resistance.” In recent years, “rightful resistance” has been found in all kinds of collective protest actions in China. For example, Zhu Jiangang’s research on home-owners’ resistance to the construction of a new building in their neighborhood park discusses how residents used “protecting their environmental rights” as a strategy to reach out to the media, and to claim they were the central state’s allies in defending the law and correcting the local government which had transgressed the law. Moreover, the resident activists carefully avoided being seen as arguing for “political freedom.” Zhu cited the activist leader’s words to illustrate the residents’ strategy of a “de-politicized politics”: “We should make them notice us but should not let them lose face” (2007).

In her analysis of the well-known Taishi Village Recall Campaign in 2005, in which the residents of this village in Guangdong province attempted to recall the incumbent village leader but were suppressed by the town police force, Sophia Woodman warned us that one of the risks of seeing law as a “safe” space for protest actions in China is that it converges with the state project of “legal construction” that attempts to channel grievances into claims for narrowly defined legal rights based on existing law. In her article, Woodman examines the “translation” process of Taishi contention into the form of a legal dispute during the campaign. She holds that

the village recall campaigners attempted to “vernacularize” the legal provisions on village governance by linking them to a more collectivist past and a vision of building a moral community. However, the lawyers and outsider activists who spoke for them translated the dispute into one about only law and democracy, and this interpretation travelled through international media and activist networks. The translation not only limited the solution to the realm of the rule of law and constitutionalism, but also silenced the villagers, especially the elderly women workers, who were very active in the campaign and endured several days of hunger strike and police violence (2011).

After the Shunwen laid-off women workers chose to focus on legal narrative in their negotiation, their public and collective criticism of the reform policies in China gradually faded into the background. It seems, in a way, consistent with what Woodman argues, that resentments about their grievances had been absorbed by legal narrative. In the SOE and COE workers’ first protest on January 26th, some workers voiced a grievance that the enterprise privatization and worker’s layoff policies were “sending the national assets to some individuals” and “sacrificing the old workers who had contributed to the country.” On February 26th, in their collective statement, the women workers wrote about their strong resentment towards post-layoff treatment, although they agreed that “it was necessary to restructure the state enterprises.” However, as they started realizing the usefulness of legal discourse in pushing the local government to start negotiation, they barely mentioned their critiques regarding layoff and post-layoff policies. They admitted that they would be satisfied if the city government could accept one of their requests—either land-sale compensation or increased pensions. And after the city government agreed to investigate the case, the women workers stopped publicly claiming that the enterprise

privatization and layoff policies were problematic. The utilizing of the legal narrative did make the collective voice of workers less radical and critical in the public arena.

But individually and privately, they remained critical of the legal institutions. When staff from the social welfare department asserted their inferiority, the women could not stop arguing with the department and urging it to change the pension counting system, even though they did not think this national system would be altered. Yet they were unsatisfied with only one victory, so the leaders started planning to fight for decent housing, immediately after the city government agreed to pay them compensation. What is more important is that they understood that their activity, which relied on the legal institution, could not challenge the institution. They did not consider their victory “a real victory,” but, as in Lina’s words, “just a small thing, which doesn’t cause much change, because we are still living at the very bottom of the society, and because our country’s institutions are problematic.” Additionally, like the Chinese workers in Mary Gallagher’s research, the laid-off women workers in my research also developed “a better sense of [their] rights but with reduced belief in the law as a capable protector of those rights.” (Gallagher 2006, 810)

Differential Consciousness

The lumber mill collective women workers had been oppressed by different policies and institutional forces throughout China’s socialist and post-socialist periods. The lumber mill and the state took advantage of their cheap labor as daughters of the first-generation workers. Due to the understanding that they were collective workers as well as the wives of the state workers, and thus neither needed nor deserved equal compensation, the women workers were laid off first, and

with less pay. Because they were both women and workers, they suffered from inadequate pensions and the difficulty of finding reemployment. Nevertheless, they were strategic to identify with the collective owners of the previous COE in order to gain compensation for their lost assets. But when the group of women workers needed to choose between identifying as former laborers or property owners, and between reasonable compensation or decent pensions, they had to give up part of what they deserved. Under multiple institutional oppressions, only strategically shifting between different fighting consciousnesses helped with their endeavor.

Chela Sandoval (2000) theorizes a postmodern consciousness and political practice employed by U.S. third-world feminists in *Methodology of The Oppressed*. First, she draws a topography of “oppositional consciousness” and maps five general oppositional sites: “equal rights,” “revolutionary,” “supremacist,” “separatist,” and “differential.” Among them, equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist modes of consciousness only allow resistance to occur when supported by coherent ideologies and fixed political agendas. By contrast, differential consciousness requires its practitioners to respond to the constantly changing conditions of the postmodern world, and switch among the other four consciousness routes as the situations of oppression or the dynamics of power rapidly change. Sandoval holds that differential consciousness implies a new kind of subjectivity, one that is developed under multiple oppressions. She then connects this new subjectivity to its root in the U.S. third-world feminism. Women of color in the U.S. have been multiply oppressed throughout the country’s history. Although they have long been politically conscious of all these different oppressions, they have had to choose to highlight and obscure different aspects of their political agenda in order to work productively within and with diverse political organizations and movements. For

instance, sometimes they privilege the radicalized aspects of their lives and identities over the gendered parts. Sometimes, the opposite. By these strategic choices, U.S. third-world feminists have gained the ability to shift the presentation of their ideologies and identities in response to different configurations of power.

Sandoval's analysis of "differential consciousness" demonstrates how social movements and collective resistance activities contain conflicting ideas within resisting groups. The laid-off lumber mill women workers had been constrained by multiple intersectional oppressions and had woven a web of various ideologies and identities generated from their lived experience through different political times. In their fight, they self-consciously and strategically privileged one aspect of their identities over others when they needed to change tactics; at the same time, the identities they privilege and the tactics they employ are constantly changing. By responding through their "differential consciousness," they are able to mobilize different resources to fight different oppressive powers.

I have found Sandoval's theorization of U.S. third-world feminism useful in my analysis of the Chinese laid-off women workers' protests, not only because she offers a model of shifting consciousness, but more importantly, points out that the ground on which we are fighting have changed which demands us to have a new understanding of subjectivities. Because of the history of white liberal feminism, white feminists and some hegemonic feminist organizations in the U.S. have privileged and demanded a purely unified identity politics, which U.S. third-world feminists do not accept on the basis of their experience of and attention to multiple intersecting categories of social marginalization (Moya 2002). Sandoval further argues that because of "the crisis of late capitalist conditions" and "the cultural angst most often referred to as the

postmodern dilemma,” more and more people are now woven into the fabric of fragmenting conditions. So she sees the U.S. third-world feminists’ possibility of generating a “common speech, a theoretical structure” that “provides access to a different way of conceptualizing not only U.S. feminist consciousness but oppositional activity in general.” Sandoval proposes a new understanding of subjectivity, that of “a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted. (14)”

In addition to this theoretical analysis of the laid-off lumber mill women workers’ consciousness, and the ideologies involved in their tactics of *shifting* tactics, I also think it is important to look into what practical outcomes this strategy has brought through the process. Looking back on their struggle, I see them trying out different resources, testing their usefulness; looking for possibilities of achieving “good enough” goals, through “trial and error.” The lumber mill collective workers tried speaking bitterness about their former work contributions and hardships, applying the legal protection of collective ownership rights, and using the narrative of all people being equal. In the end, none of these tactics helped them to hit the center of the target. But all assisted them in overcoming some of the barriers, and in jostling the jungles so as to get closer to the destination. Sometimes, they unexpectedly gained crucial support during their “trial and error” process. In the case of the lumber mill women workers, the vital weapon was an agreement that showed that the city government had allocated a piece of land to a developer for nothing.

Day to Meet the Mayor

Every 15th of each month is the “day to meet the mayor” in Shunwen, when the mayor and directors of all major government departments make themselves available in a conference room at the Letters and Complaints Bureau, and meet with residents who have petitions or issues to report. This practice is a legacy from socialist era. Every month, various groups of people, including urban citizens, migrant workers, and peasants, come to meet the leadership. The mayor and government leaders make themselves available from 8:00 until noon. It is usually crowded, so people need to wait in a long line. The lumber mill women workers decided to take advantage of this lingering socialist administrative practice. The five activist leaders went at 6:30 the morning of April 15th to start waiting in line. They were ninth in the line and would have fifteen minutes to talk with the leadership. Before their turn came, they discussed strategies for presenting their grievance and how best to use supporting evidence and arguments, which included their previous work experience and post-layoff sufferings, the legal provision of collective ownership, and desire for pensions equal to those of state workers. In short, they agreed that they would integrate all the useful resources that they could.

When they waited in line, a man passed by and entered into the meeting room. They quickly recognized him as Hong, the lumber mill’s director at the time when the state factory and the collective factory were sold around 2000. Even before they figured out how his presence might really help them in the meeting, they had got excited and had started a whispered discussion of strategy. As I mentioned earlier, the land along the river that had been filled in by the collective workers was what had triggered their demonstration. When the leading women workers looked into the COE archive during the investigation, they accidentally found a copy of

an agreement that showed the city government and the SOE had “allocated,” in the words of the document, the land to a real estate developer for nothing. I was there during the investigation. The workers asked me to film the process of checking the archive, since the police officers and governmental officials had brought a camcorder. They thought it would be good if we had our own video document. After I set up the camera and filmed for a while, the workers asked me to help them with looking through the archive. I did not know what we were looking for at that time. They just told me to look for anything strange. After that first morning, we found some informative documents that showed the establishment of the collective factory, the recruitment, and the layoff decision, but nothing too surprising. The government officials and police officers looked through what we found as well. Around noon, we stopped for a lunch break. After the government representatives left us alone, one of the women workers secretly took out a paper from her pocket: “Look what I found !” She looked both excited and annoyed: “These bastards gave our land to the developer for free! The government and the big factory [what is the lumber mill state-sector leadership were sometimes called] did this together.”

The person who had represented the city government and the lumber mill for the signing of the agreement was Hong. When Lina retold the process of “meeting with the mayor” to me two days after the meeting, she said they did not assume Hong was the only one or the most important one who had decided to give the land to the developer for free, but that the presence of Hong reminded them of the possibilities of targeting some individuals from the leadership who had participated in the land-sale decision a decade earlier. They thought this strategy might be more effective than just presenting the evidence and legal provisions of collective asset ownership. Besides, Lina admitted not for the first time in that interview, they simply enjoyed the

chance to embarrass the government officials.

During the meeting, leading women workers first talked about the history of the COE and the problem of how they had been treated differently than the state workers before, during, and after privatization. They also invoked the legal provisions to support their argument for reclaiming the assets. When they began to run out of allotted time, Lina jumped in. She pulled out a photocopy of the land-allocation agreement and announced, “I want to show you all a strange agreement. The land along the river, where Jianxin residential apartments are located now, was the land of the COE, was our land. However, this agreement shows that in 2000, the land was given away to the Jianxin real estate developer by the city government and the SOE, without any clear agreement from the COE. Let’s look at the signature on the agreement: the person who represents the government and the seller’s side was the former SOE director, XX Hong.” People in the room burst into laughter. Lina pretended to be confused and asked: “Why are you all laughing? Did I say anything wrong?” A person pointed at Hong and said, “That is him, the person you just mentioned.” “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you or know you were here,” Lina continued playing innocent. “I’m not against *you*. I’m aiming at discussing the issue *per se*.” She went further, pointing out the conflict: “We had lower redundancy pay and pensions, because we were considered as ‘purely COE workers.’ But if we are ‘purely COE workers,’ our land is collectively owned by us workers. Then we request the Jianxin real estate developer to return our land to us; otherwise, the land allocation was certainly illegal, and we request an investigation.” Even before she was able to finish her sentence, one of the vice-mayors “jumped up” (in Lina’s words) and eagerly said, “it was definitely wrong that you all were registered as COE workers. You are not purely COE workers, and you all should be considered as SOE

workers as well. The Social Security Bureau, you guys should come and solve this problem.” After that, they smiled in a kindly fashion and sent the women workers out, promised their issue would be solved soon.

I met with the leading women workers immediately following the meeting, and all of them appeared excited about their performance. They believed the vice-mayor had been involved in the land transaction, and that this was why he was so anxious to stop Lina from talking and to resolve the problem. According to the PRC Land Law, the government can allocate lands due to military use, construction of infrastructure, and other public welfare projects. But government allocation of land to business units or profit organizations is illegal. So when the city government allocated the land to the developer in 2000, the government and some of the leaders may have been participating in illegal activity. Lina described her disappointment with the officials, but she also pointed out that they did not want to catch the corrupt officials. She was very tactical in not pushing the officials too hard, but enough for a response. After all, what they wanted was government action—either an increase in their pensions or payment of land-sale compensation, instead of punishing individual officials. Roughly a month after this meeting, the city government agreed to pay the women workers seven million yuan as the compensation for their lost land and buildings. Anti-corruption is one of the Washington Consensus’ recommendations for an effective neoliberal capitalist market building (Rodrik 2002). As corruption becomes a big issue globally, China is eager to show its strength in it to stage the world.

Fifteen Years of Coming into Consciousness

At the beginning of this chapter, I outlined the following problems: why did the women

workers only start collective resistance *fifteen years after their layoffs*? How could they collectively organize when they had been separated by enterprise privatization for such a long time? And what made 2013 a special turning-point? When Ching-Kwan Lee (2007) studied and compared the protests of state workers against layoffs in Liaoning Province and the protest activities of migrant workers in Guangdong Province around 2000, she observed that the laid-off workers appeared to give up much more easily than the migrant workers. Lee claims that the capitulation was due to the fact that the laid-off workers still had housing support from their previous state enterprises, had privileges and rights as urban residents, and still retained some post-layoff assistance from the state. In short, the laid-off workers could still survive, so did not need to conduct resistance activities. I agree that when compared to migrant workers, the laid-off urban workers had some privileges and rights. But I think the assumption that people who are able to survive will not struggle is over-simplified. After all, we see people from all social statuses and all countries conducting resistance activities.

For over a decade, I have listened to the laid-off workers continually complaining about their living situations and work conditions. They have been disappointed by their post-layoff lives ever since enterprise privatization, if not before that. But when they got laid-off, they resisted the oppressive forces from both the state and the local governments. The power difference was dramatic. In the northern Fujian, a lot of state enterprises were privatized around 2000. Almost all factory worker groups protested, some for longer periods than others. However, the local governments either detained the worker leaders, and even publicly beat them as a warning to others, or ignored the workers and responded to them with silence. For example, the lumber mill collective women workers conducted a sit-in demonstration in front of city hall for

three days in 1998. The city government made a clear statement that if any of them blocked the road in violation of the law, they would be arrested; otherwise, they were welcome to sit as long as they wanted. Other than that, the city government kept silent. At that time, the laid-off workers were in their thirties or forties, and most of their children were attending elementary schools or middle schools. The privatization of education and childcare, together with society's dominant idea that the education of children should be privileged in the family, led the laid-off workers decide to give up and focus their energies on looking for reemployment opportunities. Many of them often said: "Our generation has been the lost generation of China. We will not have too much success anyway. So if our suffering can give our children a good future, we feel that it is worth it." Moreover, they believed that if the city government kept ignoring their protests, they did not possess a method to push the government to take action. In the end, the party who could not hang on would definitely be them.

However, fifteen years later, an interesting phenomenon unfolded. Almost all laid-off women workers had retired. They had pensions, although very low ones, and their children were adults with jobs and no longer needed financial support from their parents. The retired women workers had time and energy to negotiate with the city government: "We have nothing *but* time!" They often made this joke to the government officials to let them know they would not give up the fight. When they needed people to demonstrate in front of city hall, they could easily call out two hundred. Besides, the five leading protesters went to the Forestry Bureau every day, and sometimes they stayed in the office of the director peacefully complaining for long periods of time. The dynamics changed. The government employees still had work to do every day, while the retired workers had plenty of time to negotiate and consume the employees' time. In the

protest, the women workers in effect turned the “unproductive” time of old age and retirement into a socially productive force.

This phenomenon has been seen in different collective resistance activities in China. Deng Yanhua and Kevin O’Brien (2014) examined the role of the Societies of Senior Citizens (SSC) in a protest against building chemical plants in a village in Zhejiang. The SSC enjoyed substantial autonomy, financial resources and strong leadership, all of which enabled them to mobilize their members to join in the protest. Moreover, at the time of the 2005 contention, about 20 percent of the villagers were members of the SSC. In addition, both the law and the moral standard granted those aged 70 and above certain privileges when protesting. In the previously mentioned Taishi Village’s Recall Campaign, the elderly women villagers were the major participants of their hunger strike. Although their voices had been silenced in the international discussion around this protest, Ai Xiaoming’s *Taishi* documented in detail the gendered poverty in the village and the old women’s active participation in the campaign (Ai 2005).

When asked why the male workers did not participate in the protest, even though around 10% of the collective workers were men, some workers told me that the men were not yet retired and still needed to go to work every day. The legal retirement age for men is sixty, and fifty for women. Some workers also think that men were more likely to become the target of governmental policing violence, because they were seen as a bigger threat than women. Certain women workers gave me a more straightforward and amusing answer: “Because men are all cowards, and we women are fearless.” When they were negotiating with the government, one day, a “kindhearted” former male colleague invited some leaders to dinner. He tried to persuade them give up their protests: “Even if you continue making a fuss (闹), you are just wasting your

time.” He admitted that he also thought the enterprise reform was a bad decision, which “sent so many workers back home. ...But how can the state let you, a group of women, win by making all this noise? Just use your brain to think it over. How is it possible? If you achieve your goal, I will swallow this beer bottle into my stomach.” He held and waved the beer bottle. Right after the women workers got to know that the local government had agreed to pay the compensation they had demanded, a couple of leaders thought about him and jokingly said: “We should bring him a beer bottle to tomorrow!”

Their negotiation with the government was full of feminized strategies. The five leading women workers had all worked in the service industry after their layoffs, including two sales people for health insurance and a small company, and one small business owner. One of them worked as a secretary for the local court for a year. All of their service industry jobs had pushed them to improve their skills in dealing with people from different backgrounds, including governmental officials. During their negotiation with the government officials, they always reminded each other that some of them needed to be intransigent and stubborn, while others needed to adopt a softer approach. Every time after a fight with the officials, at least one of them needed to stand out and offer some face-saving kind words, in order to continue the negotiation. “We all dislike the government, but we want the government to do things for us. It’s just like being be friends with your enemy.” They used an interesting metaphor: “We cannot see the government as a government. We need to see them as we would a company or a businessman. Now you want to take money out of their pockets, and any businessman would hate this. So we must be strategic.” While they pushed the government, they were also friendly towards the officials so as to maintain good relationships with them. The laid-off women workers had clearly

learned and skillfully used a “good cop, bad cop” strategy.

What was more important was their keen awareness of the changed role of the state and the government, which was no longer to “serve the people,” at least not all the people. Fifteen years earlier, when they were first laid-off, although they were astonished and sad about the fact of losing their jobs, they remained under the illusion that the state would take care of them in some way. This illusion was an inheritance from the socialist era. However, their fifteen years of post-layoff life, the discrimination that they encountered in the new market, and the difficulties of getting assistance from the government, had all made them much more clear-headed about the position of the state in public welfare, and of the fact that workers had been left in the lower class of the society. The increase in awareness of the injustices they faced was simultaneously a process of coming into class-consciousness.

To sum up, the lumber mill women workers’ protest was the outcome of 15 years of accumulated experience. It was not a linear, progressive process of becoming resistant subjects. It was series of complicated articulations between China’s political, economic, and legal transformation that played out at national and local levels, influenced workers’ life cycle, involved workers’ understanding of their own value (sometimes even contradictory in itself), and shaped workers’ tactics of negotiation with various institutions. More importantly, how the workers perceived their value and their ability to resist was clearly a complex articulation of the socialist past and the post-socialist present. Often, these two temporalities are ironically mixed in their narrative and ideology. In the words of one of the women worker leaders, “After this protest, our minds became so clear. If we had this kind of consciousness fifteen years ago, they couldn’t have privatized our factory so easily.”

Epilogue

This dissertation project has accompanied me for a decade since I conducted pilot research interviewing laid-off lumber mill workers in 2008. The past ten years I have listened to the life stories of forestry workers in the generations of my grandmother and parents. I was impressed by all the difficulties they went through and admired the tenacity of each of them. I witnessed how their individual lived experiences and feelings converged into collective resistance: they persistently spoke to a state that was not willing to listen to them anymore, telling about their own histories and reminding the state of the values the country used to believe in. They are a group of people who live in part in the past but who are nevertheless able to humbly and quickly pick up the knowledge of the new era and make it useful for themselves. Their wisdom sublimated from their personal stories and feelings resulted in successful negotiations against the local government, which shows the strength of workers movements in general. At the same time, following the ups and downs of their experience helps to avoid a romanticized picture of the triumph of working class resistance.

The Endless Struggles

The elderly logging camp women workers obtained small monthly allowances at the end of their decade-long petition. Despite the fact that the amount of the monthly allowance is very small, even below the poverty line, it is enough for these elders to live in an extremely frugal way with some support from their families. However, after they moved into the new apartments

of the shanty town reconstruction project in Shunwen city, spending all of their life savings, more troubles emerged. They found that their new apartments had serious quality problems: exposed electricity lines, spalling concrete walls, broken concrete stairs, etc. Their ten years of protest have made the elders experienced and habitual protesters. They collected visual and textual evidence and mailed in their complaints to different levels of government, but they haven't received any response yet. I cannot help asking: will it take another ten years for them to get some inadequate compensation? How many decades do these elders have left, and will this kind of protest consume the rest of their lives?

The women workers laid off from the lumber mill, with their tactical utilization of diverse legal and political discourses, pushed the county government to promise to pay them seven millions to buy back their collective assets. One of the major reasons the county government made this compromise was because they were eager to solve this dispute so as to sell the land to the real estate developer. When the laid-off women workers began to protest in early 2014, the land of the lumber mill was estimated to be worth over one hundred million yuan, due to the dramatically high housing price. (The collective enterprise occupies 1/5 of the lumber mill's land.) However after the county government and the workers settled on the compensation agreement half an year later, the real estate market bubble had broken, and the price of the land was less than fifty million. The county government was not able to sell the land at the price they expected. Three years later this land still stands unused, and therefore the government has not paid the workers. Since they were not able to get the full compensation, the workers managed to rent out the three office and workshop buildings on the collective enterprise's land. At the end of 2016, five hundred workers divided a rental earning of three hundred thousand yuan. They

planned to continue doing this until the government sells the land and compensates them. At the same time, many retired workers cultivated the land where the mill buildings and equipment had been torn down. Each of them started several patches of vegetable garden, mostly feeding their own families and sometimes selling in the morning market. When I revisited the lumber mill in summer 2016, I saw hundreds of small agricultural fields on this post-industrial land, beside the remaining workshop building and mill walls as well as all kinds of garbage from somewhere unknown. I watched the retired workers working in the field, happy about the daily harvest. The scene in which the left-out workers reused the industrial land they used to work on for their own agricultural purposes seems to be a symbol of the working class's victory in interrupting the normal operation of state capitalism. When I felt glad about that, my partner, a white American who is more sensitive about food safety and has a higher environment standard than I do, who accompanied me on the trip asked: had the city or the people dealt with the industrial pollution on this land? If not, should people quit growing food on the land with decades of chemical pollution?

Possibility of Coalitions

The 2016 U.S. presidential election sparked a wide interest in the white male working class in the rust belt region. Liberals and leftists were shocked by how different the rust belt workers' politics were from theirs. Books and articles about this group's families and culture quickly gained a popularity, and people wanted to know more about how globalization had influenced them. When the rust belt workers blame their unemployment on Third World workers, they know little about the oppressions these Third World workers experience. They know even

less about the fact that another group of traditional industrial workers also lost their jobs in China as the Chinese government attempted to step on the world stage. The Chinese laid-off state workers, like the rust belt workers, were a privileged group who lost their jobs in the rapid development of the new international division of labor since the 1970s, and became precarious in their lives and work. The Chinese mainstream media's portrait of these workers was nothing but state-sponsored propaganda that showed the ease with which laid-off workers found reemployment around 2000. The sufferings in their real lives and their resistance to the privatization and capitalist transition have been silenced.

To understand the laid-off workers' current lives and politics, ethnographic fieldwork in their communities and collective actions is crucial. So are historical studies of their families' laboring past as well as how they understand their own stories. This is one of the achievements of my dissertation. Gender as an analytic helped me interpret their lives and memories: how proud they felt as recognized contributors to state development and modernization, how uneven the influences of the Maoist gender project were on women's everyday life and consciousness, how differently the two generations and two genders of workers encountered the reform, and how strategic their uses of diverse discourses and tactics from various historical and political junctures were. The state once raised them really high and then dropped them hard.

Despite all of the difficulties the state workers and their communities went through, it is undeniable that they were a privileged group enjoying the outcomes of the Chinese urbanization and industrialization, and they are still taking advantage of some of the legacies from that period. Like white male rust belt workers in the U.S., the Chinese laid-off workers were and still are socially advantaged in some ways compared to other groups who are more institutionally

marginalized. For example, the state power enabled the state workers to take over the forestland from the peasants. Even when they lost the rights of managing the forests after the reform, they could still reach a balance with the peasants who have gained back the property rights of the forests. However, the new migrant workers from rural southwestern China had no such luck, and they were marginalized and pushed around by both the peasants and the state workers. The state workers, while they complain that the young rural migrant workers steal their jobs, still have stable living places, urban household registration (*hukou*), local and long-term social networks, small but constant pensions, and so on. Being pitted against each other by the state development policy, it is hard for the two generations of working class to build empathy and coalition.

Besides the inter-generational working class coalition, I am also concerned about the possible solidarity between young feminist activists and the old women workers. How can the young Chinese feminists who have been politicized in the post-1990s gender (as a social construction and power relation) discourse conduct an effective dialogue with those activists who are not self-identified as feminists or particularly interested in the use of a gender discourse? Identity politics help to build communities, develop sense of belonging, and mobilize subjectivities. But our resistance should not be limited by naming and categorical definition. In recent years the Chinese feminists have spent too much time debating “who are the real feminists?” Why don’t we instead focus on the people who fight gender inequalities in their everyday life, either as individuals or in groups, and study what strategies they use? We should be more attentive to the real people and their modes of conducting resistance, instead of some exclusive labels.

Rethinking Gender and Intergenerational Dilemmas

Lastly I would like to talk about another intergenerational issue that motivated me to start this project at the very beginning: my attempt to understand the older generation folks in my family and community. I had been puzzled by the gender dilemma that I observed in their lives. The mid-aged laid-off women workers were marginalized by the sexist and ageist job market, in that they could only work at the lowest-paid and “unskilled” positions. The laid-off male workers with the burden of masculinity, hated to bow their heads working for the privately owned factories that did not treat the workers with dignity. But when they were unemployed or frequently changed jobs and thus could not support their families, they would face the pressure from the families and society calling them “failed breadwinners.” I witnessed how couples and family members often imposed pressure on each other due to this gender dilemma— a national policy that oppressed a whole urban working class was often represented as conflicts between two genders within a family. The class analysis was thus weakened in the community.

My grandmother’s decades of speaking bitterness, a strategy that was used to support her family when her work unit existed, turned into her complaints against her children after the privatization of the state enterprise and the state stepped back from elder care responsibility. When her children also suffered from the enterprise privatization, the intergenerational mutual misunderstanding and resentment grew. My dissertation research helped me historicize and contextualize my family conflicts, but could not teach me to resolve these dissensions between my loved ones. After all, life is more complicated than theoretical frameworks.

In spite of its inability to solve my family problems, this research, particularly my fieldwork living in the lumber mill neighborhood where I spent the first decade of my life and

my interviews with the workers many of whom had watched me grow up, allowed me to reaffirm my belonging to this community. I became more concerned about whether the community would be able to come back together amid all the separations and conflicts that resulted from the process of privatization. As retirement enabled the women workers to be persistent in their protest, the disconnection and reunion of a community has particular temporality too. I only revisited Shunwen once in 2016 after my year-long fieldwork in 2014. I mostly kept in touch with the workers through online social networks, especially the phone application Wechat. Although the uncles and aunts are not affluent after their retirement, they have much more time to relax, and several families often cook and eat meals together. These children of the migrants from northern China like to make dumplings and buns. They often send me the pictures and videos of them making dumplings and buns together. Through the process of collectively making food and eating around a big round table, just like what they usually did when they worked for the work unit, they are rebuilding the community. To recognize me as a member of the community, they sent me photos of dumplings and buns and told me: “we all miss you so much. You should come back soon, so we can make dumplings and buns for you!”

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