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The Practice of Urban Exploration in Investigating the Material and Visual Memory of China's Old Industrial Towns

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the possibility of applying the practice of urban exploration and archaeology in reconstructing the socio-cultural landscapes and people's everyday life in the old industrial towns of southwest China during the socialist past, and investigate how these material and visual legacies impact the urban transformation of these old socialist-industrial towns as well as local residents' perceptions of the resurgence of a (new) cold war mentality. To do this, I use the approach outlined by Alice Mah and John Weily, in which they treat landscape as a lively entity (Mah 11-12, Weily 51). Instead of being a fixed space, landscape contains different socio-cultural activities and lived experiences. Therefore, in my exploration and investigation of China's old industrial landscapes, I do not only use my eyes, but try to perceive the vibe of the landscape through touching, hearing, tasting and smelling.

Keywords

urban exploration, (new) cold war, industrial landscape, material/visual memory, ruination, Third Front

When driving across the mountainous terrains of southwest China, you will notice some dilapidated and desolate architecture hidden behind bushes and trees. Most of these buildings are made of gray or red bricks, stand less than five stories high, and have rusty fences and broken windows. They are covered by twisted branches and moss. Rainfalls and mudflows have left deep traces on the brick walls and cement floors. These ghostly factory compounds from the socialist period have gradually decayed and become part of the surrounding nature, just like the faded memories of their builders, who arrived more than half a century ago and left traces of human activity on these uninhabited natural lands. The gradual ruination of these Mao-style industrial compounds sheds light on the physical leftovers of socialist memories and the multi-temporal and multi-spatial palimpsests of old industrial landscapes.

Mao's China, like the Stalinist Soviet Union, was characterized by rapid industrialization and heightened political campaigns. Both socialist leaders were obsessed with building heavy

industry, believing that smokestacks symbolized socialist modernity and demonstrated the advantages of the planned economy. Fueled by growing tensions between the East and West and the resulting Cold War militarization and industrialization, Mao Zedong envisioned a future in which one could see an ocean of smokestacks from Tiananmen tower. Industrializing China therefore became the most important goal of the PRC government after they seized power in 1949. The first, second, and third Five-Year Plans all prioritized the development of China's heavy industry, leading to an explosive growth of factories and industrial towns across the country. Smokestacks with smoke pouring into the sky became popular urban backgrounds that demonstrated industrial modernity.

Recent studies label the industrial areas built in Mao's time as China's rustbelt. The rustbelt generally refers to old industrial towns in northeast China—the former center of Chinese heavy industry and intended to be a socialist Utopia for workers. Featuring dilapidated industrial landscapes and unsatisfied laid-off workers, the rustbelt of the northeast has received attention from both academic circles and the literature and film industries. Wang Bing's documentary Tie Xi Qu provides a comprehensive visual and sonic representation of the industrial decay of the northeastern rustbelt. Ching Kwan Lee argues that the northeastern rustbelt demonstrates the death of socialism and compares it to the market-oriented industrial sunbelt of the southeast coastal area (Lee ix). However, old military factories scattered across the mountainous regions of China's west have received less attention than the industrial cities of the northeast. With their special historical background and remote, desolate locations, these western factories have formed a unique industrial landscape and retained a nuanced relationship with their surrounding natural and human environments.

The Mao-style industrial towns in China's west form a broad but scattered and inconsistent rustbelt that runs from Gansu and Ningxia in the northwest to Chongqing, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Yunnan in the southwest. This western rustbelt is less known to the outside world because most of these industrial towns were part of a secret national defense and industrial migration project called the "Third Front" (sanxian, 三綫), which was initiated by Mao in 1964. Unlike the widely promoted model industrial cities in the northeast, these industrial towns, hiding in the mountains of China's hinterlands, were only made known to the outside world after the Cultural Revolution. For more than a decade, workers in these factories developed their own socio-cultural landscapes and formed a unique collective identity by adapting and merging the local culture with migrant culture and industrial identity. Even after the end of

Mao's industrialization, when many factories went bankrupt and entered a stage of ruination, most of these old industrial towns retained their unique landscapes. They eventually formed an in-between society where divergent sociocultural forms like industrialization and deindustrialization, socialism and neoliberalism, utopia and dystopia, and ruination and construction were juxtaposed and interconnected.

The contiguity and juxtaposition of different historical phases and sociocultural landscapes have created an interesting phenomenon of multi-temporal and multi-spatial lives in these old, Mao-style industrial towns. Li Jie suggests that the legacies and memories of Mao's China show the conciliation between ruins and utopia, with these two opposite concepts twisting together and forming a unique memory-scape of "utopian ruins" (Li 4-6). I argue that, instead of being a static state, the juxtaposition and palimpsest of multiple temporalities and spatialities is a dynamic and ever-evolving process, as these conflicting social, cultural, and political landscapes consistently overlap and interact with each other in people's everyday lives. As Alice Mah points out in her research about an old Soviet industrial town, in which half of the town is in ruins while the other half is transforming, former workers still meet in their old Soviet-style, dilapidated workers' activity room and retain to "a 'mentality' associated with the Soviet past," simultaneously living in two different worlds (Mah 117). In these old industrial towns, landscapes from the past, the present, and the future synchronize and coexist.

Method: Urban Exploration

In this article, I discuss the possibility of using urban exploration (urbex) to decipher and scrutinize different layers of the multi-spatial and multi-temporal landscapes of China's old industrial towns. The conventional approach to urban history, based on archival research and textual analysis, is inadequate for perceiving the contiguity and synchronicity of the different temporalities and spatialities of these old industrial landscapes. Alice Mah conceptualizes "landscapes as an ensemble of material and social practices, and as symbolic representations of these practices" (Mah 12). John Wylie suggests that "the notion of landscape, while broader than that of home, is thus anchored in dwelling-activities, in practices of everyday life" (Wylie 51). Both Mah and Wylie treat landscapes as living entities. Instead of being a fixed space, a landscape contains dynamic socio-cultural activities and lived experiences. In my research, I also study landscapes in relation to people's everyday work and their cultural and social lives.

Urban exploration is an urban studies method that "involves discovering a place from the inside and apprehending its physical state as well as its atmosphere." It "bears similarities with observational approaches in ethnography" and can be seen as a fruitful alternative for approaching the history of urban industrial landscapes (Audin). In her book Shanghai Homes Li Jie explores Shanghai's old residential area Shikumen and highlights changes in the spatial configurations of old western-style apartment buildings from Republican China to today's post-socialist era. The practice of urbex gives researchers a chance to engage a physical space, experience its aura, and involve themselves in a sensuous journey to perceive how a space transcends the past, the present, and the future.

Urban exploration is a popular method in urban studies, geography, and architecture, and is widely used by scholars to explore marginal urban spaces, which are referred to as Temporary, Obsolete, Abandoned, and Derelict Spaces (or "TOADS") (Mott and Roberts 231). My study uses urbex as a research practice to explore and build personal relationships to spaces that have secret histories and that are neglected by contemporary scholarship. Most spaces that I study are in a state of ruination. Instead of being in a fixed state as "ruins," these spaces are half-ruined and half-alive; derelict factory buildings and newly built real estate projects stand harmoniously side by side. My use of urban exploration is less concerned with the aesthetic value of ruined spaces or the political activism that is often embedded in the urbex approach. Instead, I focus on urbex's function of documenting memories and transcending and penetrating different temporalities. In doing so, I treat urban landscapes as living beings (Garrett 2; Mott and Roberts 232-233).

The narrative of this article follows a text-to-space structure. I focus on the spatial and architectural arrangements of two industrial towns of China's western rustbelt as well as on the textual, visual, sonic, and haptic memories embedded in these spaces. This approach relates to the rising field of neo-materialism, in which scholars try to create new, material, non-discursive ways of seeing the world. I start with the spatial arrangement of each industrial town and then zoom in to examine human activities in these diverse socio-cultural spaces as well as the transformation of local ecologies since Mao's time. In order to show the material side of Third Front industrial history as well as the palimpsests of these multi-temporal, multi-spatial industrial landscapes, I approach this topic from different "scapes"—socio-cultural landscapes, soundscapes, architectures, natural environments, mentalities, and everyday lives. I apply the method of historical archaeology in each of these "scapes" by using textual and material analyses as well as oral histories.

The spatial and material dimensions of history have been widely discussed in studies of memory. Maurice Halbwachs highlights the close connection between space and time in his famous work On Collective Memory (Halbwachs and Coser 2). Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw argue that material objects are necessary prerequisites for the feeling of nostalgia (Shaw and Chase 4). In The Arcades Project Walter Benjamin uses the metaphor of archaeology to discuss memory as a medium of the past. In my study, the derelict Third Front factories scattered across China's western rustbelt are both the reservoir and progenitor of former workers' memories of the past. Their existence also blurs the linear narrative of Mao's industrialization and modernization. These socialist leftovers create a heterotopia that disrupts and unsettles the seemingly clear-cut and linear transformation from socialist (Maoist) to post-socialist and industrial to post-industrial China.

I explore the physical spaces of Third Front factories and observe them both from the macro level (including spatial configurations and ecology) and the micro level (including machines, everyday appliances, and entertainment devices). I combine urban exploration with oral history, inviting interviewees to be my guides and looking at spaces through their eyes. By interviewing former workers and local residents, I reconstruct material landscapes and study human-landscape interactions: How did the spatial arrangement of a factory shape everyday work and life? What was the interrelation between nature, machine, and human in these old Third Front towns? The use of both oral history and local archives in my project allows me to show a general picture of industrial landscapes in Third Front factories while incorporating personal accounts of workers' experiences in the Mao era.

Third Front and The Industrial Landscapes of China's Western Rustbelt

The industrial towns of China's western rustbelt, where multiple historical phases and landscapes overlap, intersect and interact, are important excavation sites for historians and social scientists interested in understanding the unique formation process of this spatial and temporal bricolage. Since this research deals with industrial landscapes that compress, juxtapose and synchronize multiple socio-cultural levels and political-economic stages, the usually clear-cut demarcation between socialist and post-socialist, industrial and post-industrial, Cold War and post-Cold War eras are blurred. These boundaries become less important when we view the industrial landscapes and historical formations of these rustbelt cities from a dynamic and continuous perspective.

In 1965, when the countdown to the Cultural Revolution had already begun, Mao initiated a secret national defense project known as the Third Front. The increasing number of Soviet soldiers in the Northern border and American military bases in Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Southeast Asia drove Mao to believe that China was in great danger and war with these two superpowers appeared imminent (Meyskens 1-2). Therefore he deemed it necessary to secretly militarize China and prepare for invasion. Under the slogans "Prepare for war, prepare for famine; Third Front needs good people and good horses" (beizhan beihuang weirenmin, haoren haoma shangsanxian 備戰備荒爲人民，好人好馬上三綫) and "Spread out, Keep secret, Go into the mountains" (fensan yinbi kaoshan 分散，隱蔽，靠山), more than one thousand factories and thirteen million workers and soldiers were relocated to the western mountainous periphery (Chen 81). Throughout the Cultural Revolution, these workers reshaped both the physical and social landscapes of Southwest China and created their own factory culture that helped to enrich the cultural landscape of the Cultural Revolution.

Third Front was the biggest policy migration in Mao's China and has had huge impact on shaping the industrial distribution of today's China. From the 1960s to the 1980s, many urban dwellers voluntarily or involuntarily left their urban homes and resettled in remote areas of inner China and the borderlands, which by then was called the "great Third Front," or small and underdeveloped areas—the "small Third Front"—near the major cities. Factory workers were a large part of these forced migrants, but they are largely missing from the historical narratives of the Cultural Revolution. In total, around 13 million workers resettled in China's hinterland under the command of the central government (Meyskens ix). These workers spent their lives in remote and isolated areas building China's heavy industry. Therefore, there is a well-known saying in China used by Third Front workers to summarize their lives: "Dedicating our youth and our lives to the motherland and dedicating our offspring after we die (xianle qingchun xianzhongshen, xianwan zhongsheng xianzisun 獻了青春獻終身，獻完終生獻子孫)." Indeed, many former Third Front workers and their offspring still live and work in the old industrial towns. This multi-generational dwelling and working scape adds another layer to the juxtaposition of China's rustbelt landscapes in the west.

The end of the Third Front came in the 1980s when Mao's frantic industrialization and militarization had been gradually replaced by a growing yearning for improving the living standards and wellbeing of the population. The growing concerns over the environments and

industrial pollution also speeded up the closure of many Third Front factories. These factories went into transformation in the late 1970s and started to produce household appliance, fertilizer, electronics, and automobile. However, most of them did not live through the Economic Reform. These old Third Front towns are like lonely islands scattered in the big mountain and composited a long rustbelt in western China. Their heydays had been long gone. These old Third Front towns preserve the traces of Mao's industrial landscape but they are also trapped by their past and industrial identity.

In order to expose more layers of the visual and material memories that are compressed in the palimpsests of these socialist industrial landscapes, I observe the physical and socio-cultural structures of two industrial districts—one hidden in the mountainous terrains of Chongqing, near the Wu River, and the other located in the provincial capital of Guizhou. The first site, known as the 816 nuclear factory, is an unfinished and abandoned nuclear military plant near the Wu River where has a nuclear reactor that has never been in operation. In contrast, the second site, Zhenhua Electronics, located in Wudang, Guiyang, has been in operation since the socialist period. At that time, the factory, called by its military code name "083," mainly produced defense and rocket electronics.

The location and spatial arrangement of the 816 nuclear factory reflect the secrecy and the unique landscape of Third Front factories. As part of a top-secret national defense project, most Third Front factories were located in the remote and uninhabited mountainous regions of inner China. The 816 nuclear factory is divided into two parts, one on each side of the Wu River. The central part of the nuclear plant is hidden inside a hollowed-out mountain, with only a chimney visible from the outside. The workers' dormitories and the machine repair plant lie across the river, in a village on the opposite mountain. Local residents knew very little about the factory since the workers had few contacts with the outside world. The workers, who were from different parts of the country, built their own community inside the factory walls. This community eventually developed into a small industrial town. In the socialist period, Third Front factories like the 816 plant created unique industrial landscapes and factory cultures. Today, the remaining industrial ruins, memory traces, and unique work-unit cultures serve as legacies of Mao's China.

Unlike the unfinished 816 nuclear plant, the still-operating Zhenhua Electronics factory represents a continuation of Third Front culture and socialist-industrial landscapes in present

-day China. Zhenhua Electronics has been in operation since the beginning of the Third Front and has continued to grow in the subsequent decades. The factory compound is located in the suburb of Guiyang. Surrounded by a huge residential area and a vibrant commercial street, Zhenhua Electronics has transformed the area into a small industrial town, where workers hardly ever need to leave the community. Walking between old apartment buildings and the workers' activity center is like unfolding the history of the past few decades; this history's layers and twists are carved into the newly painted walls and the old bricks underneath. Many former workers still live in their old apartments and send their children and grandchildren to factory-affiliated schools. Still-operating Third Front factories and their vibrant surrounding communities provide living histories and memories of China's industrial past and obfuscate the linear "de-socialist" or "de-industrialist" narrative that has been prevalent since the Economic Reform of the 1980s.

Walking Through Industrial Landscapes

Both the Zhenhua Electronics factory and the 816 nuclear plant followed Soviet industrial models and the socio-spatial structure of Chinese danwei (work unit), in which workers were provided with everything they needed for their everyday work and lives. Like the industrial cities built in Stalin's time, factories of Mao's China were meant to be an experimental ground for socialism and the birthplace of the socialist "new man" (Kotkin 351). The walled compound of a socialist factory was essentially a socialist micro-utopia, a city inside a city with its own socio-cultural structure, discourse system, and spatial arrangements. This distinctive danwei structure also imposed a disciplinary power upon the workers, and some scholars argue that the enclosed danwei space paralleled Foucault's panopticon even as it simultaneously promoted solidarity and a collective identity among workers (Bray 9; Lü and Perry 2). This unique industrial landscape led to the formation of collective memories of the socialist era.

Walking through these landscapes is an effective way to understand the materiality of this industrial past and to observe the aura embedded in the spatial and architectural arrangements of old industrial towns. Walter Benjamin merges the discursive and spatial landscape of nineteenth-century cosmopolitan Paris in his famous Arcades Project and sheds light on the important interrelations between spatiality, temporality, memory, and the formation of urban landscapes. Michel de Certeau attempts a similar metaphor in his work

"Walking in the City," focusing on the texturology of urban space and the spatial experiences of walkers on the street (Certeau 91, 93-94). By transforming seeing into reading and walking into writing, Certeau integrates spatiality with textuality. In the next few paragraphs, I walk through these two industrial landscapes and transcribe my walking and seeing into textual records.

The 816 Nuclear Factory

The 816 is a huge factory complex divided into two parts, located on both sides of the Wu River. My local guide, Lao Li, formerly worked at the machine repair department.[1] From where he lived and worked, he could go with his coworkers to the nearby open farmland and enjoy a beautiful view of the Wu River valley. The old machine repair plant has been abandoned since the factory went bankrupt in the 1980s. Walking into the factory, we saw that the old steel gate of the compound was broken and had been replaced by a brand new electric barrier gate. The worn-out signboard of the plant was accompanied by a newly painted red sign that read "The 816 Military-Industrial Town." In the past few years, a wave of industrial tourism has been attracted to old rustbelt factories. Li said that, from what he has heard, current managers of the factory were attempting to turn this ruin into an industrial tourist town, seeing the tourism wave as an opportunity to make money and overturn the factory's long-term deficit.

Inside the factory compound, we saw lines of newly planted flowers and brand new information boards, showing the attempt to turn this socialist industrial landscape into a neoliberal tourist attraction. In order to highlight the site's industrial heritage, several broken machines had been placed randomly by the roadside and on newly seeded lawns. Li was excited to see one of these huge machines, which was painted green and had several buttons and pilot lights. He said it was the same type of machine that operated on the shop floor during his years working at the 816. When I walked close to these machines, I could smell the engine oil on their surface, as if they had not been abandoned for more than three decades but had just been turned off by their operators. The old shop floor was locked from inside. From the dusty windows, we could see the empty chamber that used to be filled with huge machinery, loud noises, and busy workers operating the machines. Li became very talkative as he walked through the places that were once familiar to him. It was like a part of his memory had revived and had merged with the old industrial space, and Li was walking on the edge between material reality and the world constructed by his memory.

Figure 1. *Worker Activity Building At 816*; Figure 2. *Dining Hall With A Stage*

After we passed through a cluster of abandoned dormitories, we arrived at a large empty space where the town on the foothills and the Wu River were visible. Li exclaimed "That's our canteen!" and walked to a building next to an empty grassland, trying to see through the closed windows. All the chairs and tables were already gone, but the stage where workers held after-work performances and dancing and singing competitions was still there. The canteen was an important part of workers' everyday lives. Not only because it provided food for those who were tired and hungry after a long day of work, but also because it provided "mental food" to light up their after-work lives.

The state supported the formation of various factory amateur art troupes because singing and dancing, as "mental food," could reignite morale and encourage workers to become devoted to the building of socialism. As an art troupe member wrote in a poem, "We play the hero on the stage; we learn from Lei Feng beyond the stage...Stage is the battle field! We grip the gun tightly in the battlefield of art and literature!" (Lin) Active promotion by the state and strict selection criteria led amateur artists to feel it was a privilege to join the factory art troupe. Therefore, they were willing to devote themselves to producing quality plays and spreading revolutionary arts among their fellow workers. Li was not a member of the factory art troupe, but he proudly claimed that he participated in several singing and dancing competitions on behalf of his work team.

From the empty grassland near the canteen, we could see the large mountain that hid the main part of the nuclear factory. The mountain was huge and covered in trees. One would hardly notice the small chimney emerging from the peak of the mountain, which was known

Figure 3. *The Wu River Running Through The Mountains*; Figure 4. *816 Nuclear Plant*

by the local residents as the "gold mountain." Since early 2018, the gold mountain and its industrial ruins had been incorporated into the tourist attraction of the "816 Military-Industrial Town." Li had never entered the artificial cave inside the gold mountain, where the central part of the nuclear factory was located. He was grateful that he did not have to work in such a dark and cold place.

Li was right about the environment inside the cave. The moment I entered the underground factory, I felt like I stepped into a different world. Inside, it was cold, dark, and wet, and everything was huge. The main "building" of the underground factory complex is around 80 meters tall (approximately 20 stories) and the whole structure is 13,000 square meters. If we add the lengths of all the tunnels and caves, the total is around 20 kilometers. The huge nuclear reactor and vast empty spaces transformed the abandoned underground nuclear factory into an ideal site for a science fiction story. It felt both strange and scary to stand inside an artificial cave that was originally designed to produce highly radioactive material but that now, after decades of ruination, had become a tourist attraction.

The 816 underground nuclear factory was a failure, as the factory never got the chance to fully operate. The abandoning of a nuclear plant in a remote mountainous region of inland China represented the end of a crazy era, but for 816 workers, this aborted project is an unfinished dream. They dedicated their youths, their lives, and their offspring to the Third Front only to suddenly became unemployed. Only a few lucky workers were able to stay in the factory. However, for the surrounding nature and local residents, it was a relief that the


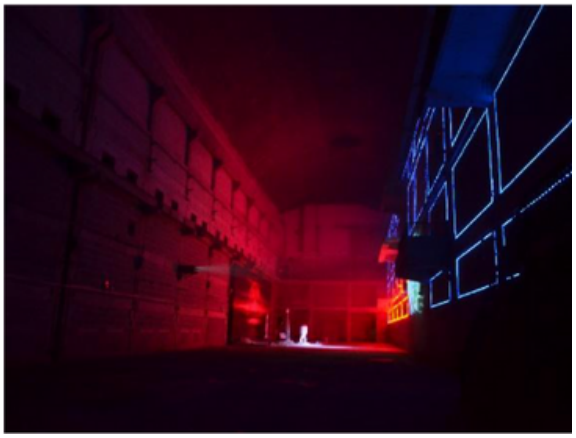

Figure 5. *Avenue From The Cave Entrance*; Figure 6. *Inside The 816 Underground Nuclear Plant*

nuclear reactor never operated, because the radioactive pollution would have been a disaster for the local ecology and the Yangtze River. The reopening of the factory as a tourist attraction seemed like a good omen to local residents, since it would provide well-paid jobs and attract visitors to the quiet river town.

The Town

Driving to the small town near the 816 nuclear plant was a pleasant journey. The town was behind the machine repair plant where Li had worked. From the factory entrance, we drove uphill for five minutes when suddenly a cluster of Mao-style architecture appeared by the road. “The building over there was a postal office. I always went there with my friends after work to check if we got any letters or packages from home.” Li turned to his right and pointed to the small, two-story building with grey cement walls: “We all loved to go there, which helped us to keep a connection with home.”

We slowly passed the small postal office and entered the town’s main street. The town looked similar to other mountain towns in the southwest, with lots of trees and a palpable humidity. The only thing that made the town different was its Mao-style architecture. Every building was from the last century; old shop signs and revolutionary slogans were still displayed on the walls. Since the factory and the town were meant to be hidden from the outside world, it was difficult to see the neighboring towns with their modern architecture. Therefore, entering the town was like traveling back in time, with material traces of Mao’s

era visible everywhere on the industrial landscape. The faded revolutionary slogans remind travelers of the gradual ruination of the site, yet the place is not frozen in time, since most shops are still open.

The main street is only several hundred meters long, with two-story buildings standing on each side. Li called out the names of the buildings as we drove by. Only a few people were walking on the street. I saw a workers' club and supply and marketing cooperatives that were still open. At the end of the street, there was a small amphitheater. Li said this was his favorite place in town—the open-air cinema. Most Third Front factories had their own film projection troupes and Li recounted that watching films was an almost nightly occurrence[1] in the factory. This was at a time when most Chinese people could only watch films a few times a month. For most adults living during the Cultural Revolution, watching films was one of the most enjoyable after-work activities. Even though only a limited number of films were allowed to circulate during Mao's time, people were still thrilled to watch them. There were only very few cinemas in the 1970s and 80s. Most people watched movies outdoors at basketball courts or other empty spaces, where mobile film projection troupes would set up screens and people would bring their own seats to create an outdoor cinema.

Li's favorite outdoor cinema was in a state of dilapidation, but a red activity banner and other decorations, hung on the place where the screen used to be, showed that local residents were still using this amphitheater for community gatherings. In the midst of China's real estate boom, the existence of a Mao-style small town undisturbed by modern architecture seems bizarre, especially considering that its neighboring towns had transformed into modern Chinese townships with newly built malls and high-rise apartments. In contrast, this small town was in a state of ruination and most current residents were former factory workers. There was no sign of an incoming population, since the 816 nuclear plant was the only job provider and had been closed for more than three decades. This town will one day either be sold to a real estate developer or transformed into an industrial tourist attraction, but before it meets this fate, it stays a living museum of the socialist industrial landscape where old and new, past and present merge and coexist harmoniously.

Zhenhua Electronics and Its Surroundings

In contrast to the ruination of the 816 nuclear plant, Zhenhua Electronics in Guiyang shows

the continuity of life from a crazy era of building socialism to another exhausting era of fast-growing commercialism. The still-operating Zhenhua factory is a lively world, very different from the quiet and uninhabited ruins of the 816 nuclear factory. When I entered the Zhenhua factory compound with my local guide, former worker Wang Yun, I heard loud machines and saw people walking busily inside the compound. Wang said that there were more than ten factories affiliated with Zhenhua Electronics and that her factory was called Hongying. She said proudly that her factory produces tiny electronics for China's spaceships and that it has expanded in the past few years.

Figure 7. *Main Entrance Of The Zhenhua Electronics*

All of the affiliated factories are clustered in the huge compound with entrances facing the main avenue. The factory compound is like an architectural museum of the last century in China. I saw Mao-style factory buildings with revolutionary slogans on the wall, low-rise office buildings with blue windows from the 80s, and 90s-style high-rise buildings with glass walls and white porcelain tiles. Walking through this bricolage of architecture from different periods materialized the palimpsests of this historic industrial landscape. Wang said that the building of the factory compound and the surrounding residential area has taken several decades and that new buildings are still being added, as Zhenhua Electronics has continuously expanded since China's economic reform.

Not all of the factories in the complex survived the brutal reform era when the market economy rapidly penetrated the old socialist industrial world and replaced the planned economy. Wang's factory itself almost went bankrupt in the mid-90s, and she and her


Figure 8. *Old Residential Blocks*; Figure 9. *An Affiliated Factory Of The Zhenhua Electronics*

husband looked for other jobs outside the factory walls. These were difficult years for them, but Wang still felt that she was lucky to get extra pay while most of her coworkers were struggling to make ends meet with their salaries from the factory. Nevertheless, Wang complained to me about her pension and how small it was compared to the high salaries of those who had been transferred to other branches of Zhenhua Electronics in China's coastal regions. Wang mentioned several times the unaffordable prices of the newly built apartment buildings near the old residential area of the factory, and I could sense that buying a new apartment in one of these buildings was her unfulfilled dream.

The residential area of Zhenhua Electronics is a lively community and a convenient place to live, with everything you could find in a small Chinese town. There are five clusters of residential apartments and more than a hundred buildings in total. Wang lives in the first cluster, which is the oldest part of the residential area. "We got here early so we were the first group of residents in this place. Our apartment was built in the 80s. For those workers who came after us, they were luckier than us to have more choices and get a newer and larger apartment." From Wang's apartment building, we could see the shiny windows of the newly-built high-rises. "You could see the new apartments from here and think it might be super close to us, but in fact, it was a long walk" (Wang). Wang frequently walked there to ask about their prices. For her, this long walk was not only a journey across different physical landscapes, but also a mental journey between the socialist past, when workers like Wang enjoyed the privilege of welfare housing and "iron rice bowls", and the brutal neoliberal reality, in which she is anxious about rising housing costs and her grandchildren's education.

The road outside Wang's apartment was busy with pedestrians and traffic. It was like a typical town in the southwest, where you can smell the spices popular in Guizhou cuisine and feel the humidity in the air. However, many of the older residents were from different parts of China; therefore, when Wang met her former coworkers on the street, their conversations would switch between the Guizhou dialect and Mandarin. Wang mentioned that, when many of her coworkers arrived in Guizhou from the north, they could not adapt to the local food, especially a popular local vegetable called fish mint, which has a very strong and strange taste. But after several years most of the northerners fell in love with this local vegetable, and every time they went back to their hometowns, they would carry a whole bag of it, since fish mint is quite expensive outside Guizhou. The huge wave of industrial migration [1] to the southwest created a unique industrial sociocultural landscape in which the northerners ate local fish mint alongside northern dumplings and locals could speak fluent Mandarin, having spent years working in a multi-dialect and multi-cultural environment.

The Palimpsests of Industrial Landscapes

The industrial history of old towns in China's west is like a ghost that still haunts landscapes and everyday lives. The former workers' experiences in Mao's factories formed their industrial identities and shaped their collective mentalities. This history also left a deep mark on workers' attitudes toward Mao's militarization and industrialization as well as their perceptions of today's China and its neoliberal economy. Covell Meyskens approaches Mao's Third Front and his obsession with militarization and industrialization from a broad Cold War perspective and suggests that the decline of the Third Front and its old industrial towns paralleled the demilitarization of China's development process and its transition to an export-oriented economy, which relies on a peaceful global environment (Meyskens 228-29). However, the rise of nationalism and a growing hostility toward the West in Chinese society today could lead to a dangerous resurgence of a Cold War mentality and discourse. It seems that Cold War tensions have never disappeared from everyday life, especially in the industrial towns of China's western rustbelt, where material traces of slogans and propagandist paintings from Mao's China can still be found on old factory walls, and where nostalgic sentiments about the socialist past can be sensed in daily conversations between former workers.

On the flip side, commercialism and neoliberalism have already permeated everyday life and reformed socio-cultural landscapes in these industrial towns. Both Li and Wang still live in their old apartments near the factory compound and spend their days in workers' activity rooms with their former coworkers. However, they are also deeply involved in the neoliberal society and economy. The long walk from Wang's old apartment to the polished, modern apartment buildings and the transformation of a former nuclear factory into a tourist attraction show the multi-temporal and multi-spatial realities of these old industrial landscapes. From my sensory journey to these western rustbelt towns, I can feel that memories of the socialist past and the brutal neoliberal present have found a way to paradoxically and harmoniously coexist in China today. [1]

Notes

1. I use pseudonyms for both of my interviewees.

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