

BOUNDED IMAGINATION: REVISITING WORK IDENTITY, SPATIAL-  
TEMPORAL MATERIALITY, AND DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSES IN CHINESE  
APPAREL MANUFACTURING

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## ABSTRACT

Jing Jiang: Bounded imagination: Revisiting work identity, spatial-temporal materiality, and development discourses in Chinese apparel manufacturing  
(Under the direction of Sarah E. Dempsey)

The global apparel manufacturing industry has long been characterized by abusive employment practices, including low pay, poor work conditions, and prolonged work hours. In light of enduring and emerging work predicaments in the apparel manufacturing industry, this dissertation investigates work identities among Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners with a focus on their imagination. Adopting a communicative lens, I develop the concept “bounded imagination.” Bounded imagination describes how practitioners’ future-oriented desires are shaped by spatial-temporal configurations and local and macro discourses. My study primarily draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with current and former practitioners in Chinese apparel factories. Qualitative data collection helped me gather rich accounts from practitioners, and iterative analysis facilitated my theory building.

My findings explicate two manifestations of bounded imagination: “constrained imagination” and “upgrading idealism.” Constrained imagination refers to production workers’ constrained career aspirations and limited ideas about the possibilities of industrial transformation. Key constraints relate to the spatial-temporal materiality in factory settings and the domestic employment context, including the rural/urban divide, the *hukou* policy, and ineffective labor organizing. By contrast, upgrading idealism focuses on owners and managers’ imagination about the future of apparel manufacturing and involves three basic elements represented by the acronym 3“Ds”: depreciation of cut and sew, desires for upgrading, and

development following Western countries. Upgrading idealism draws attention to long-existing development discourses and uneven development on the international scale.

This research demonstrates that imagination is an important site to explore workplace control and resistance. Addressing production workers' constrained imagination adds new perspectives on workers' voices and discursive practices to craft positive work identities. The findings about spatial-temporal materiality enrich the conception of materiality and offer important lessons on the role of materiality in organizing. Furthermore, my study indicates that upgrading idealism constitutes a recent iteration of "development idealism" (DI) in China. Owners and managers' articulations of upgrading involved constructions of work's value and regional and national hierarchies. Altogether, my focus on practitioners' imagination contributes novel insights into work identity, spatial-temporal materiality, and development discourses.

## 摘要

姜静：有界想象力：重新审视中国制衣业中的职业认同、时空物质性和发展话语  
(由莎拉·E·登普西 (Sarah E. Dempsey) 指导)

长期以来，全球制衣业存在着虐待性雇佣现象，包括低薪、恶劣的工作条件和超长的的工作时间。鉴于制衣业长期存在的和新近出现的工作困境，本研究以中国制衣业从业者的想象力为出发点，考察他们的职业身份认同状况。基于传播学的视角，本研究提出了“有界想象力” (bounded imagination) 这个关键概念。有界想象力描述时空形态以及局部和宏观话语如何塑造从业者对未来的欲求。本论文以中国制衣厂当前和过去的从业者为研究对象，采用了半结构化深度访谈的研究方法。定性的数据收集帮助研究者获取了丰富的从业者叙述资料；迭代分析促进了本研究的理论构建。

本研究阐释了有界想象力的两种表现形式：“受约束的想象力” (constrained imagination) 和“升级理想主义” (upgrading idealism)。受约束的想象力是指生产工人的职业理想受到约束，对产业转型可能性的想法有限，其核心制约因素涉及工厂环境的时空形态和国内就业环境包括城乡差异、户籍政策和低效的劳工组织。相比之下，升级理想主义关注企业所有者和管理者对制衣业未来的想象，包括由缩略词3“Ds”代表的三个基本要素：对剪裁加工的轻视 (depreciation)、对产业升级的欲求 (desire)，和紧随西方国家的发展 (development)。升级理想主义揭示了长期存在的发展话语以及国际发展不平衡的现状。

本研究表明，想象力是探索工作场景中的控制行为与抗争行为的重要切入点。关注工人受约束的想象力为研究工人话语权以及研究他们构建正面的职业身份的话语实践提供了新的视角。关于时空形态的研究发现丰富了物质性这一概念，并为理解物质性在组织行为中的作用提供了重要的启示。此外，本研究表明升级理想主义是中国“发展理想主义” (development idealism) 的最新表现。企业所有者和管理者关于产业升级的想法关乎职业价值以及区域间和国家间的等级关系的构建。总之，通过聚焦从业者的想象力，本研究为探索职业认同、时空物质性和发展话语贡献了新颖的见解。

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: REVISITING WORK IDENTITIES IN AND BEYOND MANUFACTURING**

### **Hardship in global manufacturing**

We went to work wearing a winter coat and went back home holding the coat in arms. You tell me how long we had stayed in the factory consecutively.

This above quote captures retired female sewer Feng Zhao's recollection of extended overtime in an export-oriented apparel factory in China in the late 1980 and early 1990s. In her interview with me, Feng described working nonstop alongside her fellow co-workers for a month eating and sleeping within the factory to finish an order of Iraqi military uniforms. Feng was tired from apparel work for more than two decades but still held vivid memory about this episode of extreme overtime in a confined space. Feng's deep memory highlights the significance of spatial and temporal configurations at work.

Feng's work experience is not atypical but reflective of working conditions in the global apparel manufacturing industry, characterized by abusive employment practices, including low pay, poor work conditions, and prolonged work hours (A. Hale & Wills, 2005). The harsh working conditions in global apparel manufacturing have generated broad labor activism and work resistance (Bair & Palpacuer, 2012; Dicken, 2015; A. Hale & Wills, 2007; Rossi, 2016). Such working conditions are not unique to apparel manufacturing but common in the global factories burgeoning since the 1970s in developing countries, such as Mexico, Barbados, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China. The notorious working conditions of global factories have motivated researchers within cultural sociology and anthropology to explore workplace control and resistance through factory ethnographies (e.g., Hewamanne, 2008; Holmström, 2007; Kim,

2007; C. K. Lee, 1998; Ong, 1987; Pun, 2005; Roberson, 1998; Wolf, 1992). These studies have generated important insight into factory discipline, national development, and the reproduction of capitalist production relations. Key insights from factory ethnographies need to be revisited now to address enduring issues in factories and emerging work predicaments in and beyond manufacturing.

### **Enduring and emerging predicaments in and beyond manufacturing**

The experiences of Chinese factory workers require continuous scrutiny, including caution against overly optimistic accounts of recent reform efforts. A range of reforms have been in place to improve factory workers' well-being, such as voluntary corporate codes of conduct (Wong & Dhanesh, 2016), improved labor laws (H. Wang, Appelbaum, Degiuli, & Lichtenstein, 2009), and civil society activism (Froissart, 2011; Pun et al., 2014; Y. Xu, 2012). These endeavors may have introduced some beneficial changes, but they are far from sufficient. For example, corporate codes of conduct have limited recognition of workers' rights (Ban, 2016) and fail to alter workers' subjugated positions in factories (X. Yu, 2008, 2015). Scandals of work abuse in global factories continue to surface in media and labor watch organizations' reports (e.g., China Labor Watch, 2016, November 29, 2017, March 24; Melnicoe, 2016, December 14). Similarly, improved labor laws do not equate with adequate implementation (Gallagher, 2014), evidenced by prevailing unlawful overtime in China's technology industry (Xue, 2021, January 20). Additionally, civil society activism suffers from a number of constraints (Franceschini, 2014; He & Huang, 2015; Mayer, 2017; Spires, 2011), and workers' rights to collectively organize are far from being recognized and protected (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014; Mayer, 2017).

With all these limits, we must remain skeptical of academic and public discourses that convey overly optimistic accounts of factory workers' mobility and agency who are

predominantly migrant workers (Ban, 2018). For example, Yan (2008) called labor mobility “the third liberation” (p. 124),<sup>1</sup> claiming that working in the cities liberated Chinese peasants’ minds as they encountered new ideas, concepts, and business modes. This mind liberation thesis is overly positive. First, migrant workers face continuous limits to obtain urban residency and equal access to social welfare and secure a decent living. Second, migrant workers are also subject to overt and covert forms of oppression in the workplace, far from achieving mind liberation. Enduring problems in factory work and constraints on factory workers highlight the need for renewed attention to workers’ well-being and mobility, especially their agency to pursue a desirable future.

The manufacturing industry also faces emerging employment challenges that require new interrogations. For example, the most pressing concern among U.S. apparel manufacturers is to recruit laborers (Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) Office of Technology Evaluation, 2018). Similarly, in China, many firms have difficulty recruiting ordinary and skilled production workers, while many recent college graduates suffer from unemployment (Qian, 2020, October 15). The employment challenge is partly due to younger generations’ lack of interest in manufacturing. On the one hand, their dissociation with manufacturing reaffirms the need to improve working conditions in factory work. On the other hand, we need to critically examine the social image of manufacturing, given the importance of discourses about particular work to people’s employment preferences (Long, Buzzanell, & Kuang, 2016). In other words, we need a critical interrogation of our appraisal of factory work in the contemporary era, which will provide insight into the employment dilemma.

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<sup>1</sup> The first liberation refers to the political (1949, national independence and following land reform); the second refers to the economic (1979, the dissolution of rural communes).

Furthermore, new trends of industrial restructuring call for attention to broader power dynamics in global production and our assumptions about work and development. Early development discourses privilege industrialization. Contrarily, emerging restructuring initiatives, especially upgrading, further differentiate work within manufacturing and emphasize technology, knowledge, service, and branding (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011). The emergence of upgrading dovetails with the turn to post-Fordist organizing in the West, which shifts attention away from industrialization and manufacturing to service work (Kuhn, 2017; Muehlebach, 2011; Nadesan, 2001; S. Tracy, 2000).

Increasingly popular upgrading discourses and growing passions for service work lead to twofold problems. First, the formula for progress distilled from the social history of the West may be a poor fit for China and other countries as they have radically different historical contexts from Western countries (Frank, 1966, September). The attachment to a similar development pattern disincentivizes exploration of alternative modes of development (Escobar, 2004, 2012). Second, emphasizing firm-level changes to gain economic benefits sidelines issues of unequal profit distribution in global supply chains. Continuing this system harms production workers who labor under low wages worldwide and reproduces regional and national hierarchies. These problems altogether necessitate scrutinizing industrial practitioners' perspectives on upgrading and situating their accounts within broader development discourses.

More broadly, the current trend of intensifying work beyond the manufacturing sector stresses the pressing need to reassess the impacts of work on us and rethink our relations to work. After the decline of Fordism, many people are pressured to extend work hours and intensify work amidst precarious working conditions, such as declining social welfare and increasing job insecurities (Bittman, 2015; Granter et al., 2015; Wajcman, 2015). For example, many workers

have to extend work hours to demonstrate their productivity and qualifications to meet rising criteria of job performance in knowledge work and service industries, such as academia (Berg & Seeber, 2016). The hustle work culture is prominent in China's technology industry, which is characterized by the "996" culture (working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week) (Lin & Zhong, 2019, April 29). The toxic work culture has also provoked the "996.ICU" movements (implying long work hours will send workers into intensive care units) in 2019, whose impacts are limits (X. Li, 2019, June 18; Xue, 2021, January 20).<sup>2</sup> The overtime work culture continues, and public discontents are brewing. Recently, the deaths of two young employees working for social commerce giant Pin Duoduo generated public criticism of its high-stress work culture and renewed discussions of overtime time in the Chinese tech industry (Xue, 2021, January 20). Moreover, the toxic work culture exists beyond the tech industry. "996" is also used to describe the Chinese academy where junior faculty overwork themselves due to mounting pressure for publication and other work demands (B. Li & Shen, 2020; J. Xu, 2020, January 7). Prolonged work time can create excess pressures, result in disordered temporality, and encroach workers' personal life outside of work (Bailey & Madden, 2017). While Feng's experience described in the opening quote seems historical, distant, and absurd, it ironically runs parallel to current working conditions in many regards. As such, insight into control and resistance in the manufacturing sector will also be valuable to understand and challenge work predicaments in other occupations.

Altogether, this section demonstrates enduring and emerging problems in and beyond manufacturing, including limits of worker agency, employment challenges in manufacturing, assumptions about development, and work intensification. In light of these predicaments, there is

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<sup>2</sup> In this movement, many programmers expressed their discontents, publicized their work regulations online, and built up a blacklist of more than 100 companies.



a need for further insight into how Chinese apparel workers make sense of their working lives. My dissertation builds on insights from factory ethnographies and organizational studies through an examination of subjectivity and imagination.

### **Revisiting worker subjectivity: Zooming in on subjective realms through imagination**

I call to extend the above insights by deepening our understanding of the subjective realms of worker identity, particularly through developing a richer conception of workers' imagination. But before delving into imagination, I want to first highlight the significance of worker subjectivity more broadly. Workers' subjectivity is integral to workplace control and resistance. Subjectivity is a contentious concept in social theory and labor process theories. In keeping with a critical tradition of factory ethnographies, I approach the subject as a historical, contingent product of social power relations (Mansfield, 2000; McGee & Warms, 2012). Subjectivity, conceived broadly, refers to the formation, role, function, and experience of the individual. Drawing on poststructuralism, numerous factory ethnographies have highlighted how workers' shifting subject positions are configured by social relations as well as local and macro discourses. In particular, these studies attend to how factory employment and attendant social relations shape the formation and transformation of workers' social identities, such as gender, class, and race. Conversely, these studies have also illuminated how workers' subjectivity affects their cooperation and resistance on the shopfloor, which matters to smooth production process and capital accumulation. In other words, how workers understand their role in the production systems and act upon their understanding is important to the maintenance and transformation of the production systems. Together, factory ethnographies demonstrate how worker subjectivity and workplace control are imbricated and coproduced.

Organizational studies, including organizational communication scholarship, have contributed significant insight into the relations between worker subjectivity and workplace control in the past three decades (Larson & Gill, 2017). Research builds around several interrelated key concepts, such as identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Nadesan, 1997), (dis)identification (e.g., Cheney, Christensen, & Dailey, 2014), meaningful work (e.g., Barrett & Dailey, 2017; Kuhn et al., 2008), workplace dignity (e.g., Lucas, 2011a, 2015), and dirty work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). These studies yield insight into how social discourses shape our perceptions of work and occupations (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005, 2007). They also demonstrate how attention to workers' discursive practices, or meaning-making processes, can illuminate the effects of power. Put another way, workers have a capacity for articulating material and discursive control on their mind and body, and their capacity is also limited in that they may still subscribe to discourses that adversely affect them.

Worker subjectivity broadly includes workers' social identities, feelings, aspirations, and self-perceived roles at work. By contrast, subjective realms, as part of work subjectivity, relates to our mental attributes, such as our aspirations, desires, imagination, ideas, and concepts. By zooming in on subjective realms, I mean to explore how our mental capacities are shaped by material and discursive conditions in and beyond work. This approach is different from existing factory ethnographies that emphasize workers' verbal or behavioral resistance (e.g., Kim, 2013; C. K. Lee, 1998; Rofel, 1989; Tian & Deng, 2015). In contrast to observable overt control and resistance, studying subjective realms draws attention to covert, invisible, and even hard-to-demonstrate effects of power on workers' mind and body. Subjective realms are partly accessible by leveraging workers' discursive capacity for articulating social control. Examining subjective realms through discursive practices is also different from conventional discursive approaches to

work identities. Studies in the latter convention often focus on how workers craft positive selves at work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a) or positive work meanings, i.e., the point, purpose, or value of work (Kuhn et al., 2008). These studies tend to assume workers' desire for positive identities and autonomy in pursuing them. By contrast, investigating subjective realms does not take workers' autonomy in engaging with discursive practices for granted. Instead, subjective realms call attention to how workers' discursive capacity itself is shaped by power relations in and beyond work.

Attending to workers' subjective realms helps illuminate the aforementioned work predicaments. Subjective realms open up a new terrain for exploring control and resistance. Addressing how factory workers' subjective realms are still constrained by work relations and social relations makes a case for continuing to advance workers' well-being. Contrarily, uncovering means whereby workers' subjective realms expand provides new inspirations for scholarly and activist endeavors to improve factory working conditions and push for more egalitarian social policies. Moreover, examining workers' subjective realms offers insight into how their perceptions of work and development are shaped by social discourses. Such insight helps us reassess the value of certain work, our attachment to a certain path for development, and our relations with work. These critical reflections are an important step toward challenging unhealthy beliefs and work relations that harm individuals, groups, and society. In short, exploring workers' subjective realms is significant to respond to a number of issues in work and employment within and beyond manufacturing. My dissertation advances this line of inquiry by focusing on a crucial aspect of subjective realms: imagination.

## **Imagination as future-oriented desires: Forwarding a communicative approach**

The concept of imagination has a long and contested history, and there is little consensus within the literature (Langland-Hassan, 2020). At its broadest, imagination refers to the ability to form pictures or ideas about things that are non-immediate, not yet experienced, new, or nonexistent. The term of imagination is used to capture diverse ideas, such as desire, dream, fantasy, image, belief, perception, memory, and supposition (Liao & Gendler, 2019). Given my interest in worker agency and identity, my approach to imagination focuses on future-oriented desires. This approach highlights the capacity of imagination to activate new thoughts and actions to respond to existing problems (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). To have future-oriented desires means that workers desire something new and different from what they are here and now, a propensity with transformative power (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002).

I build on a communicative approach to further theorize the social formation of imagination. Adopting a communicative approach means interrogating how social phenomena evolve through wide-ranging communicative practices, such as interpersonal interactions, mediated communication, and engagement with macro discourses. Organizational communication scholars have contributed insight into how work identities develop through discursive practices or meaning-making activities (e.g., Barrett & Dailey, 2017; Kuhn, 2006). Considering the important role of discourses, I also highlight the significance of space and time to work identity formation. Spatial-temporal materiality shapes conditions for communicative practices. With this approach, I focus on the communicative formation of imagination to highlight how social power sanctions, prohibits, or limits people's desires. I pay particular attention to the power of spatial-temporal materiality and local and macro discourses in shaping imagination.

Overall, my dissertation explores how imagination, defined as future-oriented desires, is constrained or expanded through communicative practices, with a focus on spatial-temporal materiality and discourses in and beyond organizational contexts. Specifically, several factors have made the Chinese apparel manufacturing industry a well-suited organizational context for this study. I begin with the suitability of apparel manufacturing.

### **Apparel manufacturing: Situating in the Chinese context**

Apparel manufacturing stands out as a research site for its labor conditions, global scale, and history. First, the general working conditions in apparel manufacturing invite continuous scrutiny. As said above, apparel manufacturing has long been recognized as a problematic work site. It faces enduring issues of extended overtime and poor remuneration as well as emerging challenges in recruiting and retaining workers. Second, apparel manufacturing is labor-intensive and employs a significant number of workers worldwide. Insights for how to improve this industry have stakes for millions of workers. Third, apparel manufacturing is a long-existing industry, and its development history reflects capitalist pursuit for profits. As labor cost is significant to apparel manufacturing, developed countries have witnessed relocations of apparel firms domestically and internationally to reduce labor costs (Gereffi, 1999). Geographical relocations of apparel manufacturing also reveal unequal power relations in global productions. Even though foreign investment brought job opportunities to recipient countries, workers in the latter also suffered from poor working conditions in subcontracted factories (Ban, 2012). Additionally, deindustrialization and outsourcing have also taken a toll on worker communities in original countries (Cowie & Heathcott, 2003). The history of apparel manufacturing is imbricated with capitalist development. Apparel manufacturing provides a window into broader

power relations in global production. All these features highlight the suitability of apparel manufacturing as a context to explore constraints on workers' imagination.

Within global apparel manufacturing, China is a particularly rich site in need of analysis. First, Chinese apparel manufacturing plays a prominent role domestically and internationally regarding employment and volume of products. China's textile and apparel sector is important to China's economy as it employs more than 10 million workers (C. Chen, Perry, Yang, & Yang, 2017). China ranks the first worldwide regarding the volumes of produced and exported apparel, respectively (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011). Second, the Chinese apparel manufacturing industry is set in an idiosyncratic national employment context. In China, regional disparities between rural and urban areas and the *hukou* policy have given rise to a large number of migrant workers, many of whom have sought employment in urban factories but are unable to settle down in the city (K. W. Chan, 2009; Cheng & Selden, 1994). Meanwhile, migrant workers have limited capacities for collective organizing under Chinese labor policies and the influence of global capital (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014; F. Chen, 2016). Additionally, migrant workers face stigmatized meanings tied to themselves and their work (Lucas, Kang, & Li, 2013; Pun, 1999). These material and discursive employment conditions have made Chinese apparel manufacturing a rich site to explore the social formation of workers' imagination.

I chose Chinese apparel manufacturing as my research site also due to my situated researcher positions. I am a Chinese national born to a working-class family who migrated out of rural villages. Growing up, I witnessed and learned about various social constraints on my family. For example, born to a large impoverished peasant household, my mother dropped out of middle school despite her good grades to save up money for her elder brother's education. In her adulthood, my mother worked nearby in an apparel accessory factory invested by a Taiwanese

businessman. She worked more than ten hours a day to raise my brother and me, barely making ends meet. My family's experience provides a glimpse into the struggles faced by millions of ordinary people in China. With this childhood experience, I have long been concerned about how research can respond to ordinary workers' rights and well-being. My experiences living in the U.S. also played a role in my strengthening my commitment to understanding the experiences of Chinese manufacturing workers' experiences under changing socio-economic conditions like restructuring. Witnessing the aftermath of the decline of the Detroit metropolitan areas while in my Master's program prompted me to wonder whether Chinese economic restructuring would bring the same fate to millions of Chinese workers. Altogether, my lived experiences led to my sustained attention to manufacturing workers in China and provided me with preliminary knowledge about the apparel manufacturing industry. Having discussed my rationales for choosing the Chinese apparel manufacturing industry as my site, I now turn to specific methodological approaches I took for this study.

### **A qualitative study of Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners**

Given my interest in worker subjectivity broadly and imagination particularly, I adopted a qualitative approach to studying apparel manufacturing practitioners. My methods involved in-depth interviews, observations, and an iterative approach to analysis. This approach allowed me to gather rich accounts from practitioners and facilitated my theory building (S. J. Tracy, 2013). My research also adopted a critical lens that linked practitioners' articulations and my local observations to broader social conditions and discourses on work and development (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). My study primarily draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with current and former practitioners in Chinese apparel factories. Qualitative interviews enabled me to gain first-hand data centering on practitioners' perspectives (S. J. Tracy, 2013). In-depth interviews helped

me elicit vivid, detailed accounts of participants' experiences, feelings, and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Before conducting interviews in China, I also engaged in fieldwork in the U.S. More specifically, I conducted factory tours, visited museums, attended public events, and interviewed factory owners and other stakeholders. These experiences provided me preliminary understandings of the global apparel manufacturing industry and facilitated my research in China. My data analysis adopted an iterative approach, as traversing between theories and research data provides promising opportunities for theory building (S. J. Tracy, 2013). I also employed prospective conjecture (S. J. Tracy, 2013), which involves creatively using theoretical juxtapositions to develop new lenses that can account for emerging insight from my data, which I briefly address in the following chapter overview.

### **Chapter overview**

My dissertation consists of seven chapters, altogether building up my argument to revisit workers' subjective realms, spatial-temporal materiality, and development discourses through attending to worker imaginations. Chapter Two develops the concept of "bounded imagination," describing how workers' future-oriented desires are shaped by spatial-temporal configurations and local and macro discourses. This chapter begins by highlighting the significance of worker subjectivity more broadly, with a focus on its relations to workplace control. Then I zoom in on a critical component of worker subjectivity—workers' subjective realms, followed by my conception of imagination. Next, I develop a communicative approach, which centers on the role of discourses and materiality in shaping work identities. I show how a communicative approach informs my understanding of "bounded imagination." This chapter concludes the call for researching manufacturing workers' imagination in non-Western countries.



Chapter Three focuses on the material and discursive landscapes of employment in China that shape the lived experiences of Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners. This chapter first discusses key material, structural constraints related to the rural/urban divide and *hukou* policy on labor mobility. It then addresses the political and economic limits on collective organizing among Chinese factory workers. Next, I describe key discourses tied to the meanings of work for Chinese migrant workers, including *dagongzhe*, *suzhi*, familial duty, and gender roles. This chapter also introduces the emergence, status quo, and challenges of the Chinese apparel manufacturing industry, connecting it to China's development path and economic restructuring on the global scale.

Chapter Four outlines my qualitative approach to studying apparel manufacturing practitioners' imagination. It consists of eight sections, starting with major insights I gained from my fieldwork in the U.S. Then, I introduce a detailed description of the rationales for and limits of interviews. After specifying practical reasons for which I suspended observation in China, I reported how I made compromises to gain IRB approval. The next three sections focus on my recruitment processes, analysis methods, and presentation. This chapter closes with a summary of participants' demographics. My preliminary fieldwork in the U.S., my interviews with Chinese practitioners, and iterative analysis yielded two major themes that I take up in the following chapters: constrained imagination and upgrading idealism.

Chapter Five builds around the key theme "constrained imagination," which describes the phenomenon of one's future-oriented desires being limited by organizational and social constraints. Constrained imagination emerged as a central work identity for apparel workers, especially production workers. Participants' narratives yielded two major manifestations. They involve constrained career aspirations and constrained ideas about the possibilities of industrial

transformation. Then, I further analyzed how spatial-temporal features of factory work and structural conditions in the Chinese context shaped workers' constrained imagination. Last, my chapter includes ways participants felt the constraints lessened up and their imagination expanded, which I called "microemancipations." In short, Chapter Five focused on how Chinese apparel production workers' career desires were constrained by spatial-temporal configurations and structural conditions in China.

Chapter Six shifts attention to macro development discourses and broader power dynamics in global production networks. This chapter does so by concentrating on owners and managers' imagination about the future of apparel manufacturing, particularly their desires for upgrading. In this chapter, I coined the term "upgrading idealism" to capture Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners' perspectives on upgrading. My analysis revealed that participants cast apparel manufacturing, especially cut and sew, as low-end work and expressed a strong desire for process and technological upgrading. Critically, this longing was imbricated in the participants' admiration for the technologically advanced West and endorsement of a development path following the West's steps. A closer examination of participants' paradoxical articulations of skill surfaced and challenged economic centrism in upgrading idealism by demonstrating potential negative impacts of upgrading on production workers and employment in manufacturing. By way of concluding, I situate upgrading idealism within broader development discourses and further problematize its conservative political orientation.

Chapter Seven closes the dissertation by highlighting its contributions and implications. I begin by comparing and contrasting "constrained imagination" and "upgrading idealism," which are constitutive of "bounded imagination." Then I explicate how "bounded imagination" contributes to scholarship on worker identities and development. Next, I reflect on the impacts of

my particular methodological approaches on the research outcomes, providing lessons for future research. This chapter concludes with practical implications along with my contemplative thoughts.

## **CHAPTER 2: BOUNDED IMAGINATION: FORWARDING A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH**

This chapter develops the concept of “bounded imagination,” describing how workers’ future-oriented desires are shaped by spatial-temporal materiality and local and macro discourses. This definition includes several elements: future orientation, desires, spatial-temporal materiality, and discourses. I develop a communicative approach, which centers on the role of discourses and materiality in shaping work identities. Before delving into my communicative approach to imagination, I first highlight the significance of worker subjectivity more broadly, with a focus on its relations to workplace control. Then I zoom in on a critical component of worker subjectivity—workers’ subjective realms, which relate to mental attributes including aspirations, desires, imagination, ideas, and concepts. Attending to subjective realms provides important insight into work identities.

### **Threading power and subjectivity**

Workers’ subjectivity is integral to workplace control and resistance. Subjectivity is a contentious concept in social theory and labor process theories. In keeping with a critical tradition of factory ethnographies, I approach the subject as a historical, contingent product of social power relations (Mansfield, 2000; McGee & Warms, 2012). Subjectivity, conceived broadly, refers to the formation, role, function, and experience of the individual. Drawing on poststructuralism (e.g., de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1984; Laclau, 1977), numerous factory ethnographies have highlighted how workers’ shifting subject positions are configured by social relations as well as local and macro discourses (e.g., Burawoy et al., 2000; Collinson, 1992;

Kondo, 1990; Pun, 2005; Rofel, 1989). In particular, these studies attend to how factory employment and attendant social relations shape the formation and transformation of workers' social identities, such as gender, class, and race (e.g., Cross, 2011; Freeman, 2000; Hewamanne, 2008; Kim, 2013; C. K. Lee, 1998; Lynch, 2007; Salzinger, 2003, 2004). Conversely, these studies have also illuminated how workers' subjectivity affects their cooperation and resistance on the shopfloor, which matters to smooth production process and capital accumulation (e.g., Ong, 1987; Tian & Deng, 2015; Zhang, 2014). In other words, how workers understand their role in the production systems and act upon their understanding is important to the maintenance and transformation of the production systems. Together, factory ethnographies demonstrate how worker subjectivity and workplace control are imbricated and coproduced.

Organizational studies, including organizational communication scholarship, have contributed significant insight into the relations between worker subjectivity and workplace control in the past three decades (Larson & Gill, 2017). Research builds around several interrelated key concepts, such as identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Nadesan, 1997), (dis)identification (e.g., Cheney et al., 2014), meaningful work (e.g., Barrett & Dailey, 2017; Kuhn et al., 2008), workplace dignity (e.g., Lucas, 2011a, 2015), and dirty work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Important here is the notion of self-identity informed by Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1984, 1991). According to Giddens (1991),

Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent (Giddens, 1991, p. 53).

Giddens' definition of identity emphasizes reflexivity, interpretation, narrative, and continuity, opening up space to discuss the role of communication in shaping workers' identities. Giddens'

notion of identity suggests that people are able to make sense of their positions within webs of power (e.g., Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Jorgenson, 2002; Trethewey, 1997). It also implies that workers' identities are not mere personal inner space but rich sites to explore the effects of organizational and social power practices. Examples of organizational studies scholars who explicitly draw on Giddens include Alvesson and Willmott (2002), Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), Kuhn (2006), and Lutgen-Sandvik (2008). Altogether, organizational studies yield insight into how social discourses shape our perceptions of work and occupations (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005, 2007). They also demonstrate how attention to workers' discursive practices, or meaning-making processes, can illuminate the effects of power. Put another way, workers have a capacity for articulating material and discursive control on their mind and body. However, their capacity is limited in that they may still subscribe to discourses that adversely affect them. Building on these insights, I argue for the need for increased attention to the subjective realms of worker identity.

### **Zooming in on subjective realms**

Worker subjectivity broadly includes workers' social identities, feelings, aspirations, and self-perceived roles at work. By contrast, subjective realms, as part of work subjectivity, relates to our mental attributes or activities, such as our aspirations, desires, imagination, ideas, and concepts. These activities involve our mind and are embodied, or personally experienced. Our subjective realms are key conditions for our meaning-making activities. By zooming in on subjective realms, I mean to explore how capacities for meaning-making are shaped by material and discursive conditions in and beyond work. This approach is different from existing factory ethnographies that emphasize workers' verbal or behavioral resistance (e.g., Kim, 2013; C. K. Lee, 1998; Rofel, 1989; Tian & Deng, 2015). In contrast to observable overt control and resistance, studying subjective realms draws attention to covert, invisible, and even hard-to-

demonstrate effects of power on workers' mind and body. Subjective realms are partly accessible by leveraging workers' discursive capacity for articulating social control.

Examining subjective realms through discursive practices is also different from conventional discursive approaches to work identities. Studies in the latter convention often focus on how workers craft positive selves at work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a) or positive work meanings, i.e., the point, purpose, or value of work (Kuhn et al., 2008). These studies tend to assume workers' desire for positive identities and autonomy in pursuing them.

Attending to workers' subjective realms helps rectify a prevalent assumption that individuals are autonomous to craft positive identities at work. To construct positive identities means to imbue in work "positive value," which is a key theme in identity literature (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Examples of workers' pursuit of positive identities are particularly abundant in studies featuring negative social and occupational discourses. For instance, campus service workers challenged patriarchal, capitalist inscriptions of their identities to carve out positive identities (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996); mid-aged professionals articulated meanings of aging alternative to the prevailing discourses that associate aging with decline (Trethewey, 2001). For another example, social service recipients tried to embody more agentic identities rather than the passive, deficient model ascribed by service providers (Trethewey, 1997). Relatedly, a prominent line of research investigates how people negotiate occupation-related stigma, taint, and indignities. These studies revealed workers' discursive practices, including ideological reframing, recalibrating, refocusing (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), selective out-group comparison (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a), differential weighting of outsiders' views (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), and foregrounding privileged social identities (S. J. Tracy & Scott, 2006).

While these studies provide insight into how workers dissociate with negative meanings in their work and craft positive ones, they assume workers' autonomy in discursive practices. In other words, it has been taken for granted that people have the desire, tendency, and capacity to craft positive selves at work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a). The subject positions revealed in existing studies are often flexible, choice-making, dedicated individuals (e.g., Halford & Leonard, 2006; Kuhn, 2006). An exception was Beech, MacIntosh, and McInnes (2008) that introduced the idea of individual "ability" for identity work. "Ability" refers to the availability of identity resources that can be used to "establish or maintain an identity position" (p. 964), such as skill, networks, discursive resources, and status. While Beech et al. (2008) began to recognize people's differential capacity for identity work, their discussion focused on more objective, tangible dimensions of identity resources. Their notion of "ability" could be enhanced by attending to workers' subjective realms. Investigating subjective realms does not take workers' autonomy in engaging with discursive practices for granted. Instead, subjective realms call attention to how workers' discursive capacity itself is shaped by power relations in and beyond work. My dissertation advances this line of inquiry by focusing on a crucial aspect of subjective realms: imagination.

### **Imagination as future-oriented desires**

The concept of imagination has a long and contested history, and there is little consensus within the literature (Langland-Hassan, 2020). At its broadest, imagination refers to the ability to form pictures or ideas about things that are non-immediate, not yet experienced, new, or nonexistent. The term of imagination is used to capture diverse ideas, such as desire, dream, fantasy, image, belief, perception, memory, and supposition (Liao & Gendler, 2019). Given my interest in worker agency and identity, my approach to imagination focuses on future-oriented



desires. To have future-oriented desires means that workers desire something new and different from what they are here and now, a propensity with transformative power (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002).

Future-oriented imagination is a critical component of agency. I build on insight from the chordal triad of agency proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). The triad explicitly lists imagination as one of the three fundamental aspects of agency: habit (or iteration), imagination (projectivity), and judgment (or practical evaluation). In this triad, imagination refers to:

the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998 p. 971).

Imagination enables actors to reconstruct and innovate upon the traditions or routines in accordance with evolving desires and purposes. According to this triad, imagination can be strongly purposive, clear, and detailed, such as goals, plans, and objectives. Also, imagination can be less articulated, such as dreams, wishes, desires, anxieties, hopes, fears, and aspirations. Regardless of the forms, imagination activates new thoughts and actions to respond to problems or desires that cannot be resolved by existing practices. Thus, future-oriented imagination is critical in explaining social transformations.

The value of imagination for transformative politics is further explicated in the concept of “situated imagination,” which focuses on the less rational forms of imagination—desires (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). To develop this concept, Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis draw on Kant and Castoriadis to highlight the creativity and situatedness of the imagination and on Spinoza, Freud, Marcuse, and Adorno to connect imagination with the political and the social. Scholars in the latter category explicitly link imagination to desires, passions, wishes, emotions, impulses, affect, and even fantasies. Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis write, “The faculty of the

imagination constructs as well as transforms, challenges and supersedes both existing knowledge and social reality” (p. 315). They contend that desire-centered imagination, though often dismissed in rational thinking, is constitutive of human knowledge production and social composition. Pun’s (2005) study of Chinese factory workers shows how less rational, non-articulated forms of imagination, such as dreams and a dream-induced scream, constitute workers’ knowledge and consciousness. Commenting on a female worker Yan’s scream during sleep, Pun (2005) writes:

In between the conscious and unconscious, the scream declared the very existence of her struggle. Crossing the realms between language and nonlanguage, between the imaginary and the real, between the self and the world, the scream was a final means of extension, beyond the boundaries of any personal and cultural limits, to occupy a deterritorialized space much larger than the world of Yan’s life (Pun, 2005, p. 187).

This paragraph suggests that the worker’s dream-induced scream reveals her deep discontent with social and organizational disciplinary powers, forming authentic resistance, or what Pun called “a minor genre of resistance.” Similarly, under Ong’s (1987) study of Malaysian factory workers, the workers’ experiences of being occupied by ill spirits testify to the distortion and alienation of capitalist disciplines. While my research does not focus on workers’ nightmares, screams, or spirits, these two examples confirm that workers’ subjective realms are a rich terrain to investigate power and control imposed by organizational and societal forces.

Furthermore, “situated imagination” highlights imagination’s development in social contexts, opening up room for further communication-informed theorization. As Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) write, “Crucially, the imagination in this context is not a straightforward faculty of the individual, but is (also or even primarily) a social faculty” (p. 325). This understanding breaks from some psychoanalytic and psychological approaches that view

imagination as a predetermined attribute of individuals. In contrast, the situatedness of imagination highlights its formation in social contexts.

Factory ethnographies have provided some examples of how work and society shaped factory workers' imagination in the form of desires. Some migrant factory workers from rural villages developed desires for urban or middle-class life through factory employment (Freeman, 2000; Hewamanne, 2008; C. K. Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005). Many female migrants were initially economically dependent on their parents at home and were expected to depend on their husband after marriage. Factory employment enabled their economic independence and provided more freedom in marriage in that they could hope to marry urban residents and settle down in cities. The workers' desires for urban life were shaped by urbanization that has degraded and denigrated rural life (C. K. Lee, 1998). These studies recognize the social nature of workers' imagination, pointing to the importance of developing a communicative approach to inform further theorization.

### **Defining a communicative approach**

Adopting a communicative approach broadly means unpacking multi-faceted social issues by interrogating their formation in practice, especially through communicative practices. Communicative practices include a wide range of phenomena, from communication infrastructures, such as radio (Dutta, 2018) to vocabulary and verbal style (Gist-Mackey, 2018), “from dyadic interactions to communicatively (re)produced organizational cultures and structures to macrolevel discourses” (Lucas, 2011a, p. 355). Here, I focus on the development of work identities through communicative practices.

Organizational communication scholars have contributed insight into how work identities develop through discursive practices or meaning-making activities. For example, Ashcraft (2007)

defined communication as “the dynamic, situated, embodied, and contested process of activating and acting upon systems of meaning and identity by invoking, articulating, and transforming available discourses” (p. 11). This understanding of communication emphasizes how discursive practices affect individual identity. The key role of meaning-making in shaping workers’ identities is further illustrated by the following statement: “Organizational members develop norms, values, meanings, that is, a certain consciousness that makes the organization and their place in it understandable and meaningful” (Deetz & Kersten, 1983, p. 160). This quote illustrates that people make sense of their identity and their organization through meanings constructed in communicative activities. Notably, meaning-making is not stable but dynamic. As Kuhn (2017) stated, “Always-contingent communicative practices stitch together an array of elements in the ongoing and precarious production of personal, organizational, and social realities” (p. 117). As part of these realities, work identities are also unstable and evolving, thus requiring constant interrogations into their formation in communicative practices. Next, I turn to the rich body of scholarship on a particularly important communicative practice: discourses.

### **Discourses**

Workers develop identities by drawing on local and macro discourses in and beyond their workplace (Kuhn, 2006). Broadly defined, discourse refers to a “material, embodied, performative process through which social actors construct their identities in a dynamic, contradictory and precarious fashion” (Mumby, 2004, p. 247). Discursive resources refer to:

a concept, phrase, expression, trope, or other linguistic device that (a) is drawn from practices or texts, (b) is designed to affect other practices and texts, (c) explains past or present action, and (d) provides a horizon for future practice (Kuhn et al., 2008, p. 163).

Discursive resources by nature are linguistic expressions that come from our lives and, in turn, affect our conceptions of selves and others. Macro discourses examined in organizational

communication studies include the American dream (Lucas, 2011b), American heroes (S. J. Tracy & Scott, 2006), grassroots (Dempsey, 2009b), entrepreneurialism (Bryson & Dempsey, 2017), aging as decline (Trethewey, 2001) and others. Studies also reveal discourses particular to certain organizations or occupations, such as the father figure associated with commercial airline pilots (Ashcraft, 2013), the family metaphor for disaster relief networks (Agarwal & Buzzanell, 2015), and the school/children metaphor used in unemployment support organizations (Gist-Mackey & Dougherty, 2020). While listed separately here, macro and local-specific discourses are not independent of each other; they may converge or diverge to shape workers' identities (Barrett & Dailey, 2017; Kuhn, 2006).

Discourses are not value-free but impose positive or negative meanings to worker identities (B. J. Allen, 2011; Parker, 2014). Marginalized workers negotiate discourses carrying negative connotations around their identity status, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class (e.g., Brenda J. Allen, 1998; Gist-Mackey, 2018; Parker, 2003; Spradlin, 1998). Discourses are not static but carry layered, sedimented histories that condition workers' identities. For example, Hewamanne (2008) has illustrated that female factory workers' gender and sexual identities in Sri Lanka are closely tied to its colonial history and Sinhala nationalism. Early British colonial rulers and writers dismissed indigenous gender practices, such as polyandry and women's property rights. They sought to create "more 'civilized'—docile, obedient, and serene" women (p. 27). As a response to colonial humiliation, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism endorsed the "new woman" who is "protector and producer of spirituality, tradition, and culture" (p. 29). As a result, "proper" women were expected to stay at home and conform to male authority. This early history formed the backdrop of Sri Lanka's contemporary gender discourses that generated anxiety about female factory workers' sexuality who left their household and entered the factory gate.

Hewamanne's study highlights how specific gender constructions shaped through colonial processes affect female workers' role in society and their sense of self.

In sum, organizational communication scholarship and factory ethnographies alike have examined how macro and local-specific discourses shape work identities. Next, I turn to how attention to materiality can further enrich an understanding of work identities.

### **Materiality**

Much recent organizational communication research draws much needed attention to materiality (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). Yet, there is little consensus on what materiality entails (e.g., Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019; Meisenbach, 2008; Novak, 2016). Ashcraft et al. (2009) identified three commonly cited elements of materiality: objects, sites, and bodies. Novak (2016) applied this triad when studying street vendors' work identities (Novak, 2016). Rich (2016) added nature to this triad when examining professional identity making in the fracking industry (Rich, 2016). Materiality is also defined in other ways. For example, Gist-Mackey and Guy (2019) focused on what they consider material resources: money, energy, and physical ability. Gist-Mackey and Dougherty (2020) approached materiality as physical autonomy and skill. These examples demonstrate the lack of consistency in how materiality is understood and operationalized.

A number of studies have recognized space as a critical component of materiality (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cruz, 2015; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Novak, 2016; Rich, 2016). These studies demonstrate that spatial features of the workplace offer cues to workers' identities. These features include size, degree of openness, and decorative style (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cruz, 2015; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Novak, 2016; Rich, 2016). Limited studies have addressed the role of time in shaping work identities (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Kuhn, 2006). They reveal

that work's temporal features shape workers' perceived meaningfulness of work. These features include whether work time is shared, autonomous, punctuated, and complex (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Kuhn, 2006; Roy, 1959; Tang & Eom, 2019). Few studies, with exceptions (e.g., Halford & Leonard, 2006), have attended to the simultaneous function of space and time, or spatial-temporal materiality. Building on this work, I argue for increased attention to spatial-temporal materiality as a key factor influencing work identities.

Contemporary structures of people's working time carry rich histories of organizational control and resistance. Working time concerns the duration/length, pace/intensity, and break of work, as well as how workers' time is measured, controlled, and remunerated (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Bittman, 2015). Since the early industrial revolution, the structure of worker's time has gone through many important transformations (Braverman, 1974; Marx, 1867; Roy, 1959; Thompson, 1967). Briefly, industrial developments introduced centralized workshops (i.e., factories), scientific management (also known as Taylorism), time and motion studies, and automation and assembly lines (broadly known as Fordism) (Bittman, 2015). The general trend in these developments was to remove industrial workers' control of time at work and transfer it to the management, which increased productivity but simultaneously reduced workers' autonomy and skill (Braverman, 1974). Losing autonomy in controlling the temporal rhythm contributes to workers' feeling of meaninglessness at work (Bailey & Madden, 2017). Additionally, workers suffered from diminishing pay and declining job security, so they resisted each of the above industrial innovations (Bittman, 2015). After the decline of Fordism, the emphasis on flexibility and service work also prompted workers to extend work hours and intensify work (Bittman, 2015; Wajcman, 2015). Prolonged work time can create excess pressures, result in disordered temporality, and encroach workers' personal life outside of work (Bailey & Madden, 2017).

Contestations over the duration of working time have also been nonstop since the industrial revolution (Bittman, 2015).

This short review illustrates that working time is a rich site of organizational control and resistance and an important factor shaping workers' experience of meaningfulness. Also, the transformations of the structure of worker's time were accompanied by changes of spatial arrangements in the workplace, such as centralized workshops, sedentary work on assembly lines, and dispersed remote work. As such, it is important to bridge space and time together and address how spatial-temporal materiality shapes work identities.

Here I highlight how communicative affordances of spatial-temporal materiality affect worker identity, especially their subjective realms. Communicative affordances describe the extent to which the spatial-temporal configurations at work allow for communicative activities. Communicative affordances include whom workers can communicate with, how often and how long they can converse, and the content of their communication. As aforementioned, communicative practices are more than discursive practices or meaning-making activities. Communicative affordances involve broader discussions of communication infrastructures (Dutta, 2018), communication content and style (Gist-Mackey, 2018), and communication participants (Lucas, 2011a, p. 355). Attending to communicative affordances moves beyond merely viewing space or time as providing cues or discursive resources for work identities (e.g., Kuhn, 2006; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Novak, 2016). Addressing communicative affordances allows me to explore how spatial-temporal materiality shapes the quality of communication, which impacts workers' subjective realms. In sum, a communicative approach is needed that centers spatial-temporal materiality. Next, I return to the significance of imagination, yielding the concept of "bounded imagination."



## **Bounded imagination**

“Bounded imagination” describes how workers’ future-oriented desires are shaped by spatial-temporal materiality and local and macro discourses. It views imaginations as dynamic, emergent in communicative practices rather than predetermined individual attributes. Explicating the descriptor “bounded” here offers insight into this concept. “Bounded” is a well-suited term to capture the limiting process. It has been used in (un)bounded rationality (Simon, 1976; Stein, 2003), bounded emotionality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992), and bounded voice (Dempsey, 2007). This term “bounded” came to my mind when I was searching for an overarching concept to capture two key themes featured in Chapter Five and Chapter Six, respectively. I also thought of another popular metaphor for limits related to work: “glass.” “Glass” is featured in many metaphors, such as the glass ceilings (e.g., Buzzanell, 2009; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015), glass walls (e.g., Roman, Jameson, & McCue, 2017), glass escalator (e.g., Maume, 1999; Williams, 1992), glass cliff (e.g., Ryan & Haslam, 2005), and glass slipper (e.g., Ashcraft, 2013).

I prefer “bounded” over “glass” as my intended meanings for “bounded imagination” differ from the implications of “glass.” First, “glass” emphasizes clear, invisible limits, but “bounded” includes both visible and invisible limits. Second, “glass” as a flat surface stresses the spatial division. For example, the glass ceiling highlights vertical separation; the glass wall focuses on horizontal compartments. By contrast, “bounded” is more comprehensive as it includes both spatial and temporal dimensions. Third, “glass” as a material object is less suitable to signify the quite abstract concept of imagination. Fourth, “glass” as a solid object implies stability and wholeness. It is less useful to capture the dynamic process of the limiting and expanding of imagination to different degrees. When we say “break the glass,” we tend to think of the glass breaking into pieces, implying the total collapse of limits. However, lessening

constraints on imagination do not mean complete emancipations or freedom. Instead, resisting “bounded imagination” is more like pulling against the limits little by little, again and again. In short, “bounded” as a descriptor allows me to show the dynamic formation and transformation of imagination. As “bounded” draws attention to the limiting of imagination, next I address the significance of focusing on boundaries of imagination.

### **Boundaries of imagination**

I have used examples from factory ethnographies to illustrate the social formation of workers’ desires. Here I show how examining boundaries of imagination further reveals how social power sanctions or prohibits desires. Novak’s (2016) study of homeless newspaper vendors provides a rich example of the disciplining of desire. According to a vendor named James:

once people found out what I was doing with the money, I lost a lot of customers...As long as I was just a little homeless guy, and they had their little dollar and could be condescending it was okay. But once they found out that I got ambition or potential, they wanted no part of it (Novak, 2016, p. 228).

According to this vendor, when customers recognized his aspirations beyond his current status, it created an estrangement from his customers. His comments illustrate how the expression of a desire for a better life can backfire or create a backlash. James describes losing income as his desires violated socially accepted scripts. To retain his customers, James learned to not talk about his desires and achievements with them, conforming instead to the limited social expectations around homelessness. This example well illustrates that workers’ imagination in the form of desires is not free-floating but subject to social discipline. It raises questions about who are entitled to what types of imagination, who are denied the capacity to imagine, and who are punished for enunciating their imagination. My project thus asks where workers’ imaginations stop and how their imaginations are constrained. Interrogating the boundaries of imagination

prompts me to focus on material and discursive landscapes that shape workers' imagination in the form of desires.

### **Spatial-temporal constraints**

Spatial-temporal configurations are important material landscapes for workers' imagination. How work is structured spatially and temporally affects workers' investment and desire at work, or what is broadly known as the ideological experience generated by production processes (Burawoy, 1985). For example, production quotas and monetary incentives for extra outputs provided by factories prompted workers to collectively develop the game of "making out" to earn these bonuses, which, as a result, secured workers' voluntary participation in increasing productivity for their employers (Burawoy, 1979). While Burawoy focused on these factory workers' consent to the unequal production process, this example can also be interpreted through the lens of imagination. That is, managers' endeavor to intensify the temporal rhythm at the site of the factory shaped workers' desires for monetary incentives, which simultaneously tempered their imagination for alternative divisions of labor and more radical forms of profit redistribution and ownership.

Attending to how spatial-temporal configurations shape imagination can advance theorization on the constitutive role of materiality. Some conceptions of materiality are limited by a resource-based understanding. For example, Gist-Mackey and Dougherty (2020) approach materiality as physical autonomy and skill, implicitly linking materiality to resources. In another study, when defining materially bounded decision-making, Gist-Mackey and Guy (2019) state,

Materially bounded decision-making is a process that occurs when decision makers are determining the best course of action by making sense of choices that are limited or constrained by their material reality (e.g. lack of access to or inability to leverage material resources like money, energy, physical ability, etc.) (p. 240).

In this definition, materiality is primarily conceived as resources such as money, energy, and physical ability. The resource-centered understanding of materiality is limited in that we tend to think of resources as things outside of our body, especially as tangible objects, estranging us from conceiving materiality as constitutive of our consciousness. Moving away from the resource-oriented understanding can enhance this study's insight into the role of materiality in shaping decision-making. More specifically, this study can further theorize the perception of choices as part of one's subjective realms shaped by materiality. Additionally, attending to spatial-temporal configurations opens up rooms for wider and deeper explorations of how organizational contexts shape decision-making.

### **Discursive orientations**

Similar to spatial-temporal configurations, local and macro discourses also guide and limit people's imagination. For example, according to an interview-based study by Geny Piotti (2009) (cited in Beckert, 2013), discourses about great economic opportunities in China strongly motivated managers in German firms to relocate parts of their production to China. Some managers recognized that their desire for outsourcing to China resembled "the Gold Rush in America" (Piotti 2009, p. 23) rather than being rooted in rational calculation. Media and industry organizations, such as chambers of commerce, presented overly optimistic portrayals of successful German firms operating in China, which misled the followers' decision to relocate and often resulted in losses. This example nicely illustrates how circulating discourses about development strongly guide economic actors' desires and decision-making.

Discourses can also limit and constrain people's desire for change. For example, Lucas (2011b) identified the prevailing discourse among the working class, consisting of a strong work ethic, provider orientation, the dignity of all work and workers, and humility, termed after

“Working Class Promise” (WCP). WCP facilitates strong member identification and ranks the working class highest in the class hierarchy. However, WCP does not consider unequal structural, material resources associated with class positions and challenges community members who uplift themselves out of the working class. As a result, WCP, as members’ discursive constructions, tempers their desire to move out of working-class positions and contributes to the reproduction of class inequalities. This case shows that examining workers’ discursive constructions can also reveal important insight into how they understand their social positions and how such understanding shapes their desires for change.

### **Conclusion: Researching manufacturing workers in non-Western countries**

This chapter has established the importance of theorizing the subjective realm of workers, especially those in traditional manufacturing sectors in non-Western contexts. The lack of attention to workers’ subjective realms can be partially accounted for by national, cultural, and class biases in our knowledge production. Extant studies have largely focused on Western workers’ experience, especially white-collar workers, and neglected workers in non-Western countries (Cruz, 2015; Pal & Dutta, 2008). The focus on meaningful work in the literature dovetails with the West’s turn to post-Fordist organizing that centers on managing workers’ values, beliefs, and serves to cultivate organizational cultures and increase workers’ commitment (Barker, 1999; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Land & Taylor, 2010; Miller & Rose, 1995; Mumby, 2015). The metaphor “the employee as identity worker” succinctly illustrates that contemporary employees are expected to maneuver their identities at work, such as positioning themselves as family members in the company (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). However, managerial practices to inoculate positive meanings, or post-Fordism more broadly, may be less relevant to manufacturing workers who face different kinds of control. What is at stake may not be the

meaning of work the managers seek to imbue, but workers' constrained capacity for crafting meanings by various limits.

Studying workers in different regional and national contexts can forward novel understandings of work identities. For example, mainstream scholarship on dirty work assumes that workers dissociate themselves with stigmatized identities (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). However, Liberian market women embraced and appropriated stigmatizing features to understand the value of their work in post-conflict times (Cruz, 2015). In addition, current conceptions of worth privilege Western-centered, individualist approaches that consider worth as something for, by, and of the individual (e.g., Halford & Leonard, 2006; Kuhn, 2006). By contrast, the understanding of the self and worth in Asian culture is more relational (Westwood & Lok, 2003); Chinese people emphasize the prestige and honor their work can bring to their family and even their ancestors (Berkelaar, Buzzanell, Kisselburgh, Tan, & Shen, 2012; Long et al., 2016; Lucas et al., 2013). These two examples demonstrate that studies situated in different regional and national contexts can bring new insight into work identities.

Overall, this chapter grounds my dissertation in rich studies on power and subjectivity. Worker subjectivity is seen as socially, collectively, historically produced through various material and discursive practices. I build on these insights and call to deepen our understanding of subjective realms, with a focus on imagination. I conceive imagination as future-oriented desires, which are essential to workers' agency and social change. Furthermore, a communicative approach informed my attention to material and discursive boundaries of imagination.

Time is ripe to attend to workers' desires, transformative consciousnesses shaped by material and discursive landscapes within and beyond the workplace. With a rich collection of

studies on identities at work, organizational communication scholars are well-positioned to examine workers' imagination as a significant part of work identities. I turn to this task through an interview-based qualitative study of Chinese apparel manufacturing workers' identity and imagination. As I discuss in the next chapter, manufacturing work, and the Chinese apparel industry specifically, is a particularly rich site for such an examination.

## **CHAPTER 3: MATERIAL AND DISCURSIVE CONSTRAINTS: CONTEXTUALIZING CHINESE APPAREL MANUFACTURING**

This chapter focuses on the material and discursive landscapes of employment in China that shape the lived experiences of Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners. Exploring Chinese factory practitioners' work identities necessitates a general understanding of the employment context in China, especially political and economic factors shaping migration as well as meanings of work for migrant workers. This chapter begins with a discussion on key material, structural constraints on labor mobility and organizing among Chinese factory workers. Next, I turn to discursive landscapes on meanings of work for Chinese migrant workers. The last section focuses on Chinese apparel manufacturing by reviewing its emergence, status quo, and challenges. This section concludes by situating the history and future of Chinese apparel manufacturing within China's passion for development, connecting my research to larger development discourses.

### **Material landscape: Structural constraints on Chinese factory workers**

China has about 300 million migrant peasant workers, who constitute the major labor force in Chinese urban areas and Chinese factories. To understand factory work in China, it is important to know structural conditions that have given rise to a large number of migrant workers and shaped their career choices.

#### **Rural/urban divide and *hukou***

Regional disparities between rural and urban areas have strongly shaped Chinese factory workers' employment and mobility (Ban, 2018; K. W. Chan & Zhang, 1999). China's economic



open reform began along the coastal areas, such as the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta. These regions prospered rapidly with export-oriented manufacturing and migrant labor from inland provinces (C. K. Lee, 1995, 1998). Many factory workers were migrants from poorer inland villages where land yield was not sufficient, and employment opportunities were scarce. They had to leave their home villages to seek employment in coastal regions. Migrant workers made a significant contribution to China's urban development and the rise of China as the world's factory (Kim, 2013; C. K. Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005; Zhang, 2010).

However, migrant workers were constrained by the rigid rural-urban dual *hukou* (residence registration system, 户口) regulations to register as urban residents and enjoy social welfare associated with urban residency (K. W. Chan, 2009; Cheng & Selden, 1994). The benefits include healthcare, unemployment assistance, and pension. Urban residency may be a prerequisite for offspring's public education and house purchase in the city. After many years of work, the workers still maintained the "migrant" status. In recent years after *hukou* reforms, some migrant workers become eligible for urban residency or some social welfare in the city after paying social securities for certain years. *Hukou* reforms have received positive appraisals in popular media as they enhanced migrant workers' mobility (Ban, 2018). While the reforms deserve a certain degree of acknowledgment, we must remain cautious against overly optimistic presentations of migrant workers' mobility and recognize the limitations of *hukou* reforms (Ban, 2018). For example, some large cities, such as Beijing, continued to constrain education opportunities for migrant workers' offspring in other means, weakening the effects of *hukou* reforms on enhancing migrant mobility (M. Yu & Crowley, 2020). Additionally, even without policy restrictions, many migrant workers are unwilling or unable to settle in the city as they cannot afford the high costs of living there, especially the cost of lodging. Housing prices in

large cities have rocketed in recent decades and become particularly unaffordable to low-income workers. Besides the *hukou* policy, migrant workers also face limits imposed by Chinese labor policies.

### **Political and economic constraints on collective organizing**

Chinese labor policies constrain Chinese workers' rights to unionize and collectively bargain with their employers (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014). The Chinese government prohibits independent trade unions in the mainland; the only legal trade union in mainland China is the All-China Federation of Trade Union (ACFTU) (C. K.-C. Chan, 2013). Founded in 1925 during China's socialist period, ACFTU has a long history. However, many workers are not aware of its existence. ACFTU is absent in many private enterprises. In businesses where ACFTU exists, ACFTU is often criticized as irresponsive and pro-management by workers. ACFTU functions more as service providers and dispute mediators than an advocate for workers (F. Chen, 2016). The passive roles assumed by ACFTU are tied to their relations with the state and employers. ACFTU is politically submitted to the Chinese Communist Party and financially dependent on employers (Pan, 2015). ACFTU's political submission and economic dependence shape its priorities to reduce capital-labor antagonisms and maintain social harmony rather than organizing and advocating for workers. Admittedly, ACFTU facilitates labor law legislation to protect individual labor rights (F. Chen, 2016). However, Chinese labor laws are perceived as "high standard, low enforcement" (Gallagher, 2014). Put in another way, Chinese labor laws have specified a wide range of labor rights, but these laws are not enforced adequately, making it difficult for workers to claim their rights through official means.

Amidst constrained official means to collectively organize and claim rights, Chinese workers have resorted to unofficial organizing to solve workplace issues, such as sporadic strikes

(C. K.-C. Chan, 2014; F. Chen, 2016; C. K. Lee, 2007; Zhang, 2010). There are no official statistics on the number of strikes and other forms of collective action in China. According to China Labor Bulletin (CLB), a Hong Kong-based advocacy organization, China witnessed increasing cases of workers' collective action from 2011 to 2017. CLB made estimates based on publicly available news reports from 2011, which they believed only account for 10 to 15 percent of the total incidents of workers' collective action. Based on CLB's collected data and weighting, there might be 18,000 to 28,000 cases of collective action in 2015 in China. Most collective actions were sporadic, small-scale, and remained unknown to the public (F. Chen, 2016). However, some large-scale strikes gained national attention and even prompted local governments to formulate policies to guide wage consultation and collective bargaining, such as the *Honda* strike in 2011 (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014).

Chinese workers and even Chinese governments are also subject to the power of global capital. For example, in *Honda's* case, the local governments' efforts to promote collective bargaining were eventually suspended amidst pressures from global capitalists, who lobbied the governments and enounced objections in popular media (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014). The local governments had to consider global capitalists' interests as the local economy heavily relied on foreign investment and export-oriented industry. This case demonstrates that global capital constrains Chinese labor organizing through influencing Chinese local labor policies (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014).

Altogether, the rural/urban divide and *hukou* policy shape the labor compositions in Chinese factories and migrant workers' mobility; domestic laws and global capital's influence constrain effective collective organizing among Chinese factory workers. Both features shaped the methodological approach I took for this dissertation, which will be explicated in Chapter

Four. Here I only briefly discuss the impacts of the Chinese employment context on my methods. First, as many factories do not have trade unions or other types of organized worker groups, there existed no worker-run listservs or associations for me to gain access to workers. Instead, I had to rely on individual-based interviews and snowball sampling methods. Second, due to their migrant status, many factory workers tend to move between urban workplaces and rural homes and often return to their home villages during the Chinese Spring Festival. Many of them were locked down in their home villages during the festival in 2020 due to COVID-19, prompting me to employ virtual interviewing for data collection. Additionally, many factory workers have multiple short-term or temporary employment segments. Such rich employment histories prompted me to inquire about their whole employment trajectories rather than merely focusing on their current jobs. This section addresses the material, structural constraints shaping Chinese factory work. As people's career choices and preferences are shaped by discourses on meanings of work (Long et al., 2016), next, I turn to the discursive landscape of employment for Chinese migrant workers.

### **Discursive landscape: Meanings of work for Chinese migrant workers**

The meanings of work for Chinese industrial workers have changed significantly along with China's economic reform, which has marked the decline of state enterprises, the rise of the private sector, and the emergence of a new class of migrant workers. New meanings of work for migrant workers are often tied to their migrant status and marginal positions in society. The shifting terms for production workers and their connotations provide a prominent example.

#### ***Dagongzhe***

Migrant workers assume a new subject position as *dadongzhe* (workers, 打工者), contrasting with older generations of production workers. In the socialist period dominated by

Maoist ideology, production workers in state-owned factories were called *gongren* (production workers, 工人), a working subject implying a sense of pride or nobility through sacrificing oneself for a greater good (Pun, 2005; Rofel, 1989; Westwood & Lok, 2003). At that time, working for the state, regarded as an “iron rice bowl,” guaranteed lifetime employment, healthcare, housing, and pension,<sup>3</sup> and not everyone was eligible for formal employment in state enterprises. Gaining access to formal employment relied on one’s educational background, such as a bachelor’s degree and *guanxi*, that is, one’s family and personal networks.

Market reform since 1978 has been smashing the iron rice bowl and marked the rise of new working subjects *dagongde* (打工的) or *dadongzhe* (打工者)—people working for others. *Dagongzhe* primarily refers to migrant workers from rural areas, suggesting working for the boss without a sense of belonging to the employer or the city (Pun, 1999, 2005). *Dagong* (working, 打工) highlights the migrant, temporary, and subordinate work status among migrant workers. *Dagong* also carries stigmatized meanings of work performed by migrant workers, which are further revealed through the usage of the term *suzhi* (human quality, 素质).

### ***Suzhi***

Migrant workers and the work they assumed are both deemed *suzhi di* (素质低), or *di suzhi* (低素质), that is of low human quality (Berkelaar et al., 2012; Gao & Qian, 2020). *Di suzhi* is associated with a low level of education or knowledge and poor mannerism, implying the marginal, peripheral status of migrant workers and low value in their work. By contrast, *gao suzhi* (high quality, 高素质) is tied to better formal education, advanced knowledge, and good

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<sup>3</sup> It is also known as the *danwei* (单位) system in China.

manners, typically associated with white-collar workers in reputable organizations (Long et al., 2016).

Discourses of *suzhi* help the state regulate and control rural populations, whose *di suzhi* was deemed an impediment to China's modernization (Anagnost, 2004). Discourses of *di suzhi*, on the one hand, legitimizes the state's inventions to rejuvenate the rural area, including promoting local urbanization and migrant workers' employment in the city. Urban employment is associated with gaining new concepts, ideas, and skills in popular discourses and some academic accounts (e.g., Yan, 2008). Discourses of *di suzhi*, on the other hand, paradoxically exacerbate the exploitation, marginalization, and fixity of migrant workers in the city (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Sun, 2009). Migrant workers' *di suzhi* is used to legitimize low wages for them in urban businesses. Similarly, it legitimizes denying migrant workers' urban residence and social welfare in governmental policies.

Additionally, discourses of *di suzhi* adversely affect migrant workers' camaraderie. Migrant workers recognize and internalize the stigma associated with *di suzhi*. They may seek means, such as practicing religions, to boost their *suzhi* and distance themselves from other migrant workers who they believe remain *suzhi di* (Gao & Qian, 2020). Here, discourses of *di suzhi* again benefit workplace control and the interests of capital by impeding migrant workers' camaraderie and solidarity.

As *dagong* and *di suzhi* suggest, working in the city has negative and undesirable connotations for migrant workers. However, they nonetheless are committed to urban employment. Therefore, we need to seek explanations for their work choices in nonwork spheres. Next, I turn to the impact of family values on migrant workers' employment.

### **Familial duties**

The motivation to fulfill familial responsibilities plays an important role in migrant workers' commitment to work in the city (Lucas et al., 2013). Materially supporting one's family is a strong moral and cultural obligation in Chinese culture (Westwood & Lok, 2003). Working in urban areas enables migrant workers to save up money and send it back to their rural homes to support their families, allowing them to meet cultural expectations. Thus, family obligations help sustain migrant workers' commitment to strenuous work in the city despite their disadvantages compared to their urban peers (Lucas et al., 2013). While familial duty has strongly motivated generations of migrant workers, its imperative is not taken for granted by young generations born after the 1980s. Instead, Chinese Post80s workers negotiate tensions between enduring familial collectivism and increasing individualism (Long et al., 2016). While familial duties are applicable to all migrant workers, they also have a gendered dimension, as reviewed next.

### **Gender roles**

Gender disparities and differences structure migrant workers' work experience in many regards in patriarchal China (Pun, 1999). First, women's lower social status contributes to their sacrifice for their family rather than pursuing their own dreams or passions. For example, in peasant families which lacked resources to support education for all children, it was often the female who would drop out of school and then work to support her brother(s) and the family (Pun, 2005). Second, different genders are associated with different physical capacities and psychological propensities (C. K. Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005; Tian & Deng, 2015). Gender, physical ability, and job positions are closely tied together. For example, positions involving heavy machinery and heavy labor are associated with men's work, such as cutting in apparel factories. By contrast, electronics manufacturing is associated with women's work as it often requires

delicate fingers (Pun, 2005). Moreover, gender is articulated with one's psychological attributes. For example, female workers are perceived as more submissive and easier to control compared to males in managerial imaginations, such as in Pun's (2005) of a mainland factory run by Hong Kong managers.

Gender does not work alone but intersects with one's age, marital status, and place of origin (C. K. Lee, 1998). Besides *dagongzhe*, terms to address migrant workers also include *donggongmei* (working females, 打工妹) and *dagongzai* (working males, 打工仔). *Mei* and *zai* specify workers' genders and signify their relatively young age. Migrant workers' young, single, and unmarried status all contribute to "the dormitory labor regime," under which migrant workers live in factory-provided compacted dorms, allowing extended labor control in nonwork space and time (Pun & Smith, 2007).

Above all, *dagong*, *suzhi*, *familial duty*, and *gender constructions* provide a glimpse into the discursive landscape on meanings of work for Chinese migrant workers. These terms reveal how they are viewed by society and themselves, and such perceptions have implications for their career choices, work motivations, socialization, and treatment received at work. This section and the former section altogether portray a general material and discursive landscape of employment conditions for Chinese factory workers, which helps us understand the lived experiences of Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners. With this broad understanding, I now turn to histories and features particular to Chinese apparel manufacturing.



## **Apparel manufacturing in China: Past, present, and future**

This section addresses the rise of Chinese apparel manufacturing, its current features, and challenges related to its future, closed by situating my discussion within broader development discourses in China. The historical emergence of Chinese apparel manufacturing offers important insight into its status quo and particularly its challenges. I begin with two key factors facilitating the rise of Chinese apparel manufacturing: the labor process transformation in apparel making and geographical relocations of global apparel manufacturing.

### **The rise of Chinese apparel manufacturing**

Modern apparel manufacturing emerged through the labor process transformation from individualized whole-garment making to standardized manufacturing under factory systems. Traditionally, a tailor can make a whole garment that fits specific individuals. In the late 19th and early 20th century, standardization of sizes and the division of labor made possible mass production of garments at a low cost under the factory system (Collins, 2002, 2003). In this system, each worker receives a bundle of garments, completes one operation on each of them, reties the bundle, and passes on the bundle to the next worker. The typical labor process in apparel factories consists of marking, cutting, sewing, labeling, quality control, and packaging (Hewamanne, 2008). Sewing and assembly account for approximately 80 percent of all labor costs (Dicken, 1998). These processes capture the function of cut and sew facilities (*lailiao jiagongchang*, 来料加工厂). Other tasks related to apparel manufacturing include design, textile sourcing, branding, and sale. Standardized manufacturing not only reduced labor costs but also allowed the production process to move away from customers, unlike traditional tailors who had to measure individual bodies in person.

Relocation of apparel production on the international scale facilitated the rise of Chinese apparel manufacturing. As labor cost is significant to apparel manufacturing, developed countries have witnessed international relocation of apparel firms to reduce labor cost (Gereffi, 1999). By the 1970s, many U.S.-based apparel firms closed their domestic production facilities. They established assembly lines in low-wage, offshore locations, especially in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America (Collins, 2002). Since the 1980s, China began to attract a large amount of foreign direct investment by textile and apparel manufacturers from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chinese apparel production and exports accelerated after China's entrance to WTO in 2001 and the elimination of trade quotas (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011). In short, global capital's search for low-wage labor, China's economic liberation, state support, and international trade policies all played important roles in the rise of Chinese apparel manufacturing.

### **The status quo of Chinese apparel manufacturing**

Chinese apparel manufacturing plays a prominent role domestically and internationally regarding employment and volume of products. China's textile and apparel sector is important to China's economy as it employs more than 10 million workers.<sup>4</sup> China ranks the first worldwide regarding the volumes of produced and exported apparel, respectively (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011). Between 1995 and 2009, China's share of global apparel exports increased from 22% to 41%, representing an increase in value from USD 32.9 billion to 122.4 billion (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

Geographically, the apparel production is concentrated along China's coastal lines, where free trade zones were first established. In 2006, five coastal provinces (Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Fujian) represented 83% of China's total apparel output (Li & Fung

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<sup>4</sup> Source: *Industrial Enterprises and Employment in 2013* (C. Chen et al., 2017)

<sup>5</sup> In 2011, China's share in the global apparel market was 41% (Goger, 2016).

Research Centre, 2007, cited in Frederick & Gereffi, 2011). The geographical concentration in Chinese apparel manufacturing evidences China's rural/urban divide discussed in the above session.

As for ownership, private domestic enterprises gained dominance over state-owned enterprises with economic liberalization and expanding foreign direct investment. FDI and private domestic enterprises together accounted for about 95% of the industry's total exports in 2004 (Li & Fung Research Centre, 2006). While China's apparel manufacturing has been export-oriented, the domestic market is expanding and has increasing significance along with national economic development.

Chinese apparel manufacturing also features a gendered division of labor, like their counterparts in other countries. While cutters are often males, females predominate the assembly lines. Women account for about 80 percent of apparel manufacturing workers in developing countries; this proportion also applies to the U.S. (Collins, 2002). Similarly, the Chinese apparel manufacturing industry also employs more female workers than male workers. Moreover, the feminization of apparel work is intertwined with assumptions about women's value, the skill required for work, and the value of work. Among managerial accounts, apparel production is perceived as women's work and associated with natural ability and low skill, justifying poor remunerations for apparel manufacturing workers (Collins, 2002; Mohanty, 1997).

### **Challenges and upgrading policies**

Despite its international prominence, Chinese apparel manufacturing faces challenges in profit-making and lacks negotiation power in global production systems. Like suppliers in other developing countries, Chinese apparel manufacturers, especially cut and sew, are often subject to conditions and price pressure imposed by global lead buyers in developed countries (Nathan,

Tewari, & Sarkar, 2016; Zhu & Pickles, 2014). Many Chinese apparel manufacturers report low profit margins to sustain businesses (Zhu & Pickles, 2014). Also, Chinese apparel factories, among other manufacturing factories, have difficulty attracting and retaining production workers, especially skilled production workers (Qian, 2020, October 15).

In recent years, the Chinese government has been seeking to rejuvenate apparel manufacturing through promoting industrial restructuring, particularly upgrading (Zhu & Pickles, 2014). Apparel upgrading typically refers to suppliers' expanding capacities, shifting from assembly/cut, make, trim (CMT), to original equipment manufacturing (OEM), to original design manufacturing (ODM), and to original brand name manufacturing (OBM). CMT facilities are mainly responsible for cut, sew, and trim garments. OEM, also known as full-package production or free on board (FOB), involves textile sourcing and other production activities, except for design. Suppliers of ODM assume design and product development responsibilities. OBM refers to firms that have design and marketing capacities. Upgrading often accompanies technological advancements, establishing more connections within supply chains, and diversifying products and markets (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011). All these transformations seek to increase barriers to entry and improve added value for apparel manufacturers.

The current upgrading policies and former state support that facilitated the rise of Chinese apparel manufacturing together demonstrate that the Chinese government has greatly shaped China's apparel manufacturing industry. To gain a deeper understanding of the rise, status quo, and future of Chinese apparel manufacturing, I broaden the contextualization here to offer a historical perspective on the Chinese government's industrial aspirations.

## **Industrial aspirations under development idealism**

The Chinese government's passion for industrial development is shaped by development discourses emerging in China's modern history. The origin of Chinese development discourses dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when China experienced military defeats by foreign industrialized nations, such as during the Opium War (1839-1842) with Great Britain (Thornton & Xie, 2016). The national humiliation prompted many Chinese intellectuals to seek explanations and methods for self-salvage. The slogan "the backward will be beaten," which regards a nation's backwardness in the economy, military, and technology will bring about defeat and humiliation, emerged as a harsh lesson for the country to remember deeply (Y. Wang, 2020). This slogan also prescribed moving forward strategies—to develop economic and military power through expanding industrial capacities and promote technologies. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, economic development has been the top agenda of the Chinese government, except for during the Cultural Revolution (Thornton & Xie, 2016).

The historical background reveals important insights into China's attachment to development. First, the emergence of China's quest for development relates to the unequal relationship between China and Western colonial powers. Second, after military defeats, China has regarded itself as lagging behind the West and aimed to develop by emulating Western countries. The desire to catch up with and even outperform the West continues and disseminates to ordinary Chinese workers (Ross, 2007). Third, industrialization lies at the core of China's early development strategies. These insights help explain the Chinese government's introduction of foreign direct investment and its promotion of apparel manufacturing in the 1980s.

More broadly, Chinese industrial aspirations are tied to the dissemination of development idealism worldwide (Thornton, Dorius, & Swindle, 2015; Thornton & Xie, 2016). Development

idealism is a well-disseminated cultural model that supplies normative standards, aspirations, and behavior related to development for nations, organizations, and individuals (Thornton & Xie, 2016). These beliefs are derived from the development history of northwest Europe and regions populated by its diasporas. In the middle of the 1940s, development in the West became juxtaposed with underdevelopment in other countries. Economic growth facilitated by government planning became a dominant theme in development discourses. Development economics emerged as a discipline that abstracts principles of development from the history of the West for Third World nations to emulate. Pioneers of development economics distilled savings, investment, and productivity increases as key principles for development. In the 1950s, core advocated economic development strategies included (1) capital accumulation; (2) deliberate industrialization; (3) development planning; and (4) external aid (Escobar, 2012). While economic transformations predominate development projects, development also encompasses social and cultural guidelines, such as education, smaller households, gender equality, and individualism (Thornton & Xie, 2016). In short, China's early development strategies demonstrate the impact of broader development discourses, particularly development idealism.

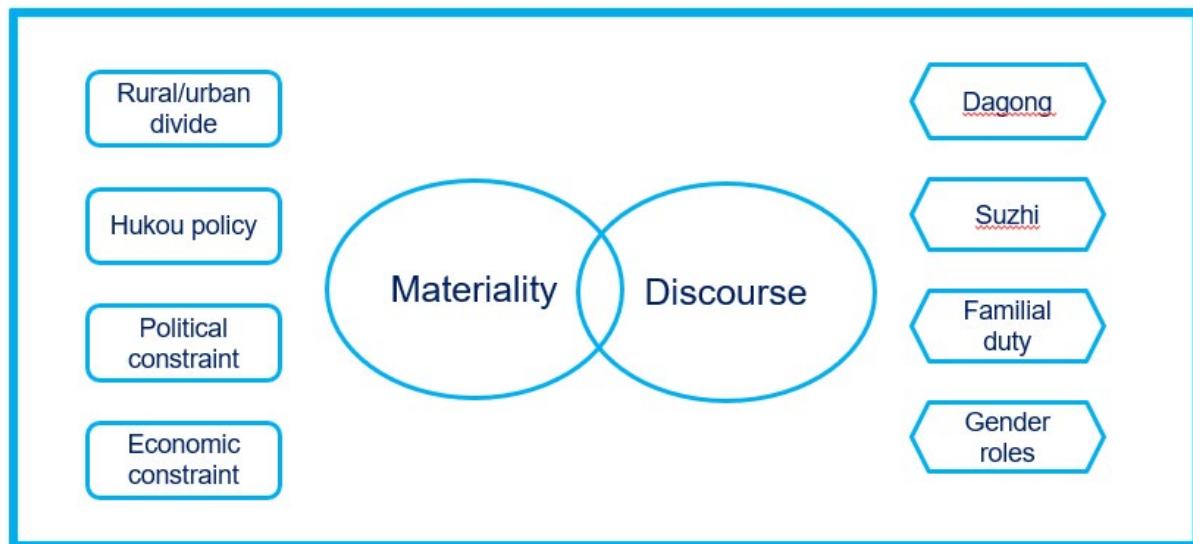
Overall, development discourses have shaped the Chinese government's industrial strategies. Amidst the rising prominence of upgrading policies promoted by the Chinese government, my research sought to understand apparel practitioners' perspectives on upgrading, with a focus on their perceived relationship between upgrading and development. With these insights, my study offers an increased understanding of the imagined future of apparel manufacturing among apparel practitioners, which will be discussed in Chapter Six.

## Conclusion

This chapter provides key material and discursive contexts for my research on Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners' work identities (see Figure 1). Materially, regional disparities between rural and urban areas and the *hukou* policy have given rise to a large number of migrant workers, many of whom have sought employment in urban factories but are unable to settle down in the city.

### Figure 1

Illustration of Chinese Employment Context



Discursively, migrant workers face stigmatized meanings tied to themselves and their work. Their subject position as *dagongzhe* highlights their migrant, temporary, and subordinate work status. Their subordinated and marginalized position in society is also captured by the term *disuzhi*, which stresses their lack of education, skill, and quality. Despite negative identities imposed on them, migrant workers sustain their urban employment. A key factor motivating their

work relates to their desire to fulfill familial duties, a cultural obligation in the Chinese context that emphasizes collectivism. Moreover, their familial responsibilities are tied back to the rural/urban divide in China, under which rural poverty has made it necessary for peasant workers to seek urban employment to support themselves and their families. Additionally, gender differences also impact migrant workers' career trajectories, the division of tasks at work, and labor control. Female workers are more likely to shoulder familial responsibilities, assume work required delicate fingers, and be perceived as submissive and easy to control in managerial discourses. This chapter also introduces the emergence, status quo, and challenges of the Chinese apparel manufacturing industry, connecting it to China's development path and economic restructuring on the global scale. Altogether, this chapter offers important material and discursive contexts for an exploration of Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners' identities. In the next chapter, I further illustrate how these contexts shaped the approach I took for studying Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners' work identities, particularly their imaginations.



## CHAPTER 4: IN SEARCH OF BOUNDED IMAGINATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF APPAREL MANUFACTURING PRACTITIONERS

This chapter outlines my qualitative approach to studying apparel manufacturing practitioners’<sup>6</sup> imagination. My methods involved in-depth interviews, observations, and an iterative approach to analysis. This approach allowed me to gather rich accounts from practitioners and facilitated my theory building (S. J. Tracy, 2013). My research also adopted a critical lens that linked practitioners’ articulations and my local observations to broader social conditions and discourses on work and development (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Below, I discuss my rationales, procedures, challenges, and reflections related to research design, data collection, analysis, and representation. It consists of eight sections, starting with major insights I gained from my fieldwork in the U.S. Then, I introduce a detailed description of the rationales for and limits of interviews. After specifying practical reasons for which I suspended observation in China, I reported how I made compromises to gain IRB approval. The next three sections focus on my recruitment processes, analysis methods, and presentation. This chapter closes with a summary of participants’ demographics.

### **Gaining preliminary insights from fieldwork in the U.S.**

My original plan for this study included a comparative element focused on American and Chinese apparel workers’ imagination. However, securing a comparable pool of U.S. participants

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<sup>6</sup> “Practitioner” is an all-encompassing term, which includes employers/employees, or owners/managers/ordinary workers. More specifically, practitioners include owners, top directors (厂长, *changzhang*), department managers (主管, *zhuguan*), administrative staff members, assembly line leaders (组长, *zuzhang*), designers, production workers, and salespersons. “Production worker” refers to workers who engage in activities that transform fabrics and other raw materials into saleable garments. Production workers include cutters, pattern-makers, sewers, ironers, and package workers and exclude accountants and sales representatives.

was difficult amidst the massive decline of apparel manufacturing in the U.S. My experiences in the U.S. field witnessing the aftermath of this decline informed how I approached the Chinese context. More specifically, I initially visited two U.S. apparel factories, attended public events about the apparel industry, visited museums featuring the textile and apparel industry, collected organizational documents, and conducted eight interviews. My interviewees included four factory owners, two NGO members, and two other stakeholders. During the fieldwork, I learned about production processes in apparel manufacturing, gained insight into working conditions, witnessed the dark sides of industrial decline, heard about challenges in retaining the workforce, and saw organizing for social change and alternative modes of business development. Together, these experiences of the decline of apparel manufacturing in the U.S. underlined the importance of developing a critical understanding of proliferating Chinese discourses praising the possibilities of restructuring.

### **Learning about production processes**

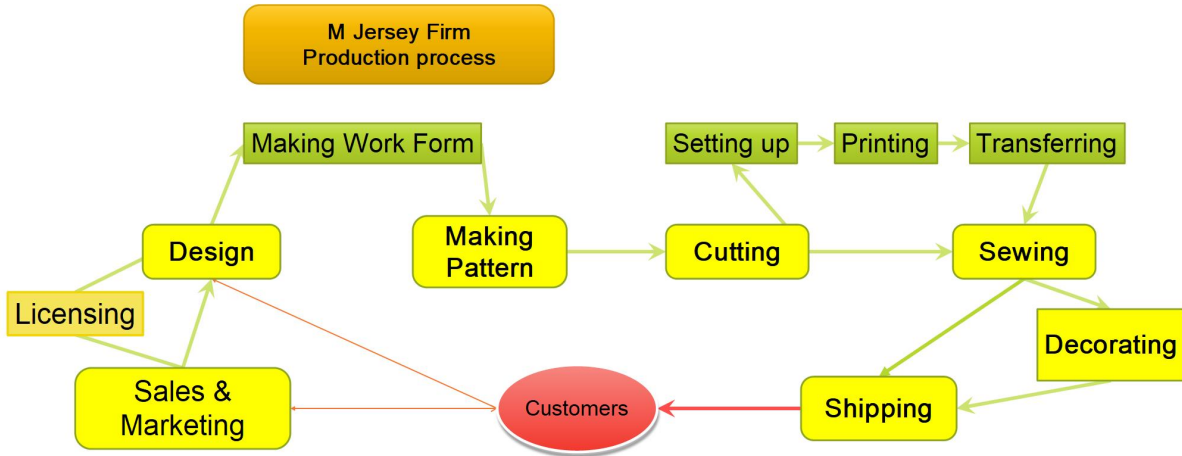
My U.S. factory site visits enabled me to observe apparel production processes. These initial observations of factory layouts and processes were helpful in later conversations with Chinese apparel workers when they talked about their jobs. My observations of, for example, M Jersey Firm's production process, reaffirmed the importance of considering the physical, embodied experiences of working in a factory setting. (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> The following figure shows the production process of making sports jerseys included sales and marketing, design, pattern-making, cutting, sewing, decorating, and shipping. The work processes relied on machines and inputs from external organizations, such as fabric, patches, ink, and print papers.

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<sup>7</sup> I did not take photos of the production processes in M Jersey Firm because I had not received institutional review board approval for taking photos.

**Figure 2**

Production Process in M Jersey Firm



*Note.* Yellow boxes represent major production processes. Green boxes are part of the production processes.

My initial factory observations helped me gain a glimpse into the embodied experience of the working conditions. When touring M Jersey Firm’s cutting and printing departments, I had to raise my volume and walk close to my tour guide to hear each other. The loud noise from the cutting and printing machines made natural conversations difficult. When visiting the W Print Firm, I almost fainted on the shopfloor. The temperature in the production room was much higher than in other rooms because of heat from the machines and insufficient air conditioning (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). The following figures show the printing machine and heating machine respectively. My pregnancy might have made me more sensitive to the environment. Only after resting and drinking water in the air-conditioned conference room, was I able to continue my interview and observations. My embodied experience reveals that noises generated by machines made coworker communication difficult and that machine heat made factory work

physically demanding. The adverse impacts of machines on production workers' bodies alerted me to overly optimistic discourses on technologies when studying Chinese apparel practitioners.

**Figure 3**

Printing Machine in W Print Firm



**Figure 4**

Heating Machine in W Print Firm



### **Witnessing the aftermath of restructuring**

My fieldwork in the U.S. included many attempts to connect to apparel workers via researchers, nonprofit organizations, factory owners, and field visits. For example, I tracked down a professor who specialized in NC's textile and apparel industry; he emphasized the difficulty of getting access to apparel factories. In another example, I got connected to a nonprofit organization focusing on labor issues in the apparel industry. However, this organization concentrated on developing countries and lacked information on domestic apparel workers.

The closed factories that dotted North Carolina's landscape also testified to the collapse of the textile and apparel industry. After locating online mentions of a couple of apparel factories in a nearby town, I visited them in the hopes of making contact. During one visit, I found the factory that I was looking for had been permanently closed (see Figure 5). I walked around the building and saw its closed door and brick-sealed windows with broken glass. My encounter with a closed mill was reflective of the overall decline of the textile and apparel manufacturing industry in this area. A former factory owner that I tracked down shared during a phone call that he could give me a tour of his city and point out all of the dilapidated factories in the town.

While it was easy to spot empty factories, it was much harder to locate former apparel workers. In my visits to former factories, I pursued multiple strategies to recruit apparel workers, current or past. For example, I hoped to reach out to the laid-off workers by W Print Firm, but the owner said that he did not keep track of them. I also posted recruitment flyers in local laundromats near closed factories. These attempts were ultimately not successful.

## Figure 5

### A Permanently Closed Textile Mill



My failed attempts to find workers point to the significant impacts of global trade relations on NC's and the U.S. apparel industry. With the passage of ATC<sup>8</sup> and NAFTA<sup>9</sup>, the apparel industry in the U.S. lost trade protections. It was subject to intense competition from apparel exporters. The rate of job loss in the apparel industry increased dramatically. Between 1973 and 2000, the U.S. lost 826,000 jobs in the apparel industry (Collins, 2002). As the second-largest textile state and the third-largest apparel state in the U.S. in terms of employment, North Carolina has been hit hard in the recession. As Figure 6 shows, in 1996, there were 2,153 textile and apparel plants in North Carolina employing 233,715 people. In 2006, the number of plants

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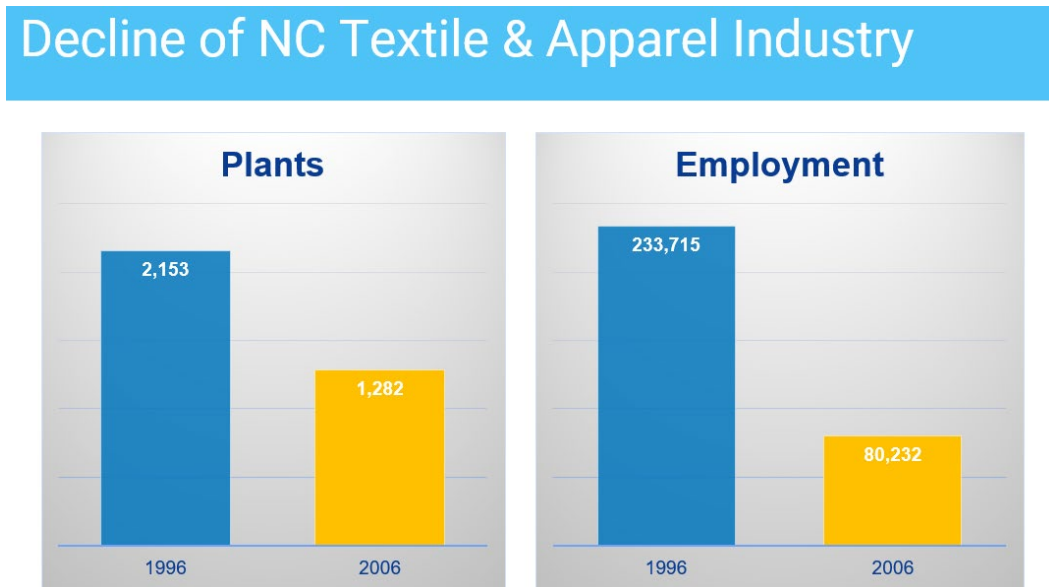
<sup>8</sup> The World Trade Organization's (WTO) Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) aimed to gradually phase out trade quotas. ATC also accelerated quota growth to improve developing countries' access to developed countries (Brambilla, Khandelwal, & Schott, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect in 1994, which established free trade among Canada, the United States, and Mexico. A key provision of NAFTA pertinent to the textile and apparel industry is that any garment assembled in Canada, the United States or Mexico is eligible for duty- and quota-free treatment in another NAFTA market as long as it contains yarn and fabrics produced in any of the signatory countries (Frederick, Bair, & Gereffi, 2014).

decreased to 1,282, and the number of workers dropped to 80,232. Figure 7 displays the NC apparel industry experienced a 70% decline in jobs and 55% of plants from 1996 to 2006.<sup>10</sup> NC now employs over 27,500 workers in about 700 textile manufacturing facilities. The shrunken apparel manufacturing sector in NC partly explains the difficulty of identifying apparel workers and relevant stakeholders.

**Figure 6**

Decline of NC Textile and Apparel Industry

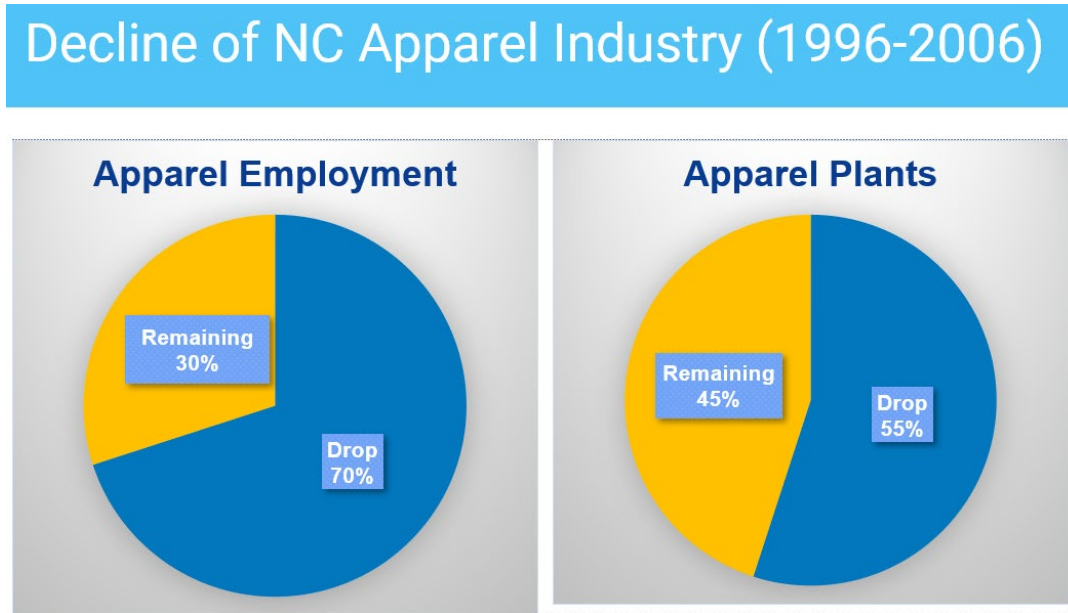


<sup>10</sup> Information is accessible from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-recent/6259> Adapted from "North Carolina in the Global Economy," a publication of the Duke University Department of Sociology.



**Figure 7**

Decline of NC Apparel Industry (1996-2006)



The challenges to finding apparel workers were also related to the lack of collective organizing among them. While U.S. garment workers were swift to establish labor unions as early as the 1890s,<sup>11</sup> union participation has been declining since the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> The decline of union participation is not specific to the apparel industry but prevalent across industries (Burawoy, 2015). The two factories (i.e., W Jersey Firm and M Print Firm) I visited both did not have workers' unions. Without after-work organizing, it was challenging for me to locate workers outside of work. Having witnessed the negative impacts of the shrinking apparel manufacturing industry on employment and workers' community-building, I became more

<sup>11</sup> Examples of early unions include the United Garment Workers of America (UGWA) (founded in 1891), the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) (founded in 1900 among women's clothing workers), and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) (formed in 1914 among men's clothing workers). For more information, see Williams, G. M. (n.d.). Labor unions. <https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/fashion-clothing-industry/labor-unions>

<sup>12</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Amalgamated-Clothing-and-Textile-Workers-Union> (09/03/2018). Retrieved from <https://unitehere.org/who-we-are/industries/> (09/03/2018).

vigilant about optimistic discourses of restructuring in my research on Chinese apparel manufacturing.

### **Hearing concerns about workforce availability**

During my U.S. fieldwork and interviews, I repeatedly heard the concern about recruiting and retaining apparel workers, especially the younger generation. This concern highlights the importance of examining apparel workers' perspectives on apparel work, especially their unwillingness to remain in the industry.

According to an industrial assessment, most U.S. textile and apparel manufactures reported the availability of workforce as the greatest barrier.<sup>13</sup> Sixty-one percent of the respondents had difficulties hiring and/or retaining employees, especially production line workers such as operators and machine technicians. “Finding Skilled/Qualified Workers” and “Finding Experienced Workers” were the key workforce issues identified for the near future (2017-2021). Fifty-eight percent anticipated difficulties finding and recruiting younger workers to fill vacancies left by retiring workers. The industrial assessment also proposed action plans:

The industry must also do a better job of attracting younger workers by focusing on improved wages, adding higher-value STEM jobs with increased automation and emphasizing advanced fibers, fabrics, and products.

While this assessment offered important insight into the challenges faced by U.S. apparel manufacturers, I did not think the recommended strategies were sufficient to respond to the younger generations' unwillingness to participate in apparel work. Instead, we need to better understand the nature of apparel work by investigating apparel workers' perspectives.

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<sup>13</sup> BIS received 571 survey responses, which represented 1,122 manufacturing facilities and 212,768 total full time equivalent (FTE) employees in 2016. Among the 517 organizations, there are 230 textile mills, 128 textile product mills, and 213 apparel manufacturers. Apparel manufacturers constituted 50 percent of the total 2016 FTEs (Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) Office of Technology Evaluation, 2018).

Besides production line positions, entrepreneurial and managerial positions in apparel factories may not be attractive to younger generations. During my visit to the family-based M Jersey Firm, a long-term worker expressed concerns about unemployment, revealing that none of the business owners' children was interested in taking over the company. So, he worried that the factory might be closed when the owners retired. This example highlighted the need to examine how owners and managers understand managerial work in apparel manufacturing and apparel work in general.

### **Seeing alternative paths for development**

The most rewarding part of my fieldwork in the U.S. was to see alternative paths for business development. The three apparel factories (C, M, and W) I learned about all had unique characteristics. C Firm was a prominent example of workers' cooperatives in which workers had company shares and participated in decision-making. Unfortunately, I did not tour C Firm because my plan to visit it clashed with its relocation to a larger facility. However, I conducted factory tours in M Jersey Firm and W Print Firm. M Jersey Firm's history demonstrated niche markets for local apparel firms' survival and prosperity against the mainstream offshoring trend. While many firms moved to Mexico and Central America after NAFTA's passage in 1994, M Jersey Firm was relocated to the U.S. from Europe in 1995 to shorten the lead time and meet the growing demand for sports jerseys in the U.S. After its return, M Jersey Firm had been growing steadily.

Unlike M Firms' market-driven relocation, W Print Firm stayed in the U.S. to remain accountable for local development. In the 1990s, W Print Firm laid-off workers and shrunk production as its big buyers, such as Nike, sent their orders overseas. However, W Print Firm's owner William expressed pride in his decision to remain in the community rather than relocating

his facilities overseas. William embraced 3“P”s as triple bottoms of business: people, profit, and planet. He believed in the importance of being accountable to the environment and community besides gaining profits. My interaction with William provided examples of his business ethics. Our interview took place in W Print Firm’s conference room, where the lighting was dim. Looking over the windows, I saw trees and bushes around the building. William explained he avoided turning on the lights if not necessary to save electricity. He said the nearby plants were planted and cared for by him and other workers in the factory. At one point when I drank from the plastic water bottle I had brought with me, he pointed out that my bottled water was not environmentally friendly. He noted that he always carried a reusable bottle for water. During the interview, William also emphasized supply chain transparency. He described how W Print Firm was developing a program to make visible the supply chain to consumers, including the source of fabrics, cut and sew, and the place of printing and packaging. Taken together, these anecdotes illustrate that, for William, issues of sustainability and supply chain transparency were important to how he was representing what he saw as the future of his business.

While C, M, and W firms diverged in their business practices, their owners illustrated a similar stance of “we are good people.” They emphasized that their wages and benefits were better than those offered by their competitors. While they might not represent mainstream business practices, their focus on ethics departed from popular images of factories emphasizing poor working conditions. Of course, their responses – and perhaps their emphasis on their ethical practices – were also shaped by the interview context, involving pressures to present a good image.

My preliminary research on nonprofit organizing involving environmental and labor issues in the textile and apparel industry also shaped how I came to this research. For example, I

learned about an NGO specializing in educating consumers about sustainable fashion. This NGO highlighted fast fashion's harm to the environment and apparel workers; they aimed to reduce pollution, waste, and sweatshop labor by encouraging organic materials, recycling, and transparent business practices. Recent efforts were also emerging to rejuvenate NC community textile and apparel histories as part of the broader initiative of improving community life. Capitol Broadcasting Company (CBC) has been redeveloping Rocky Mount Mills in partnership with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Community Histories Workshop (CHW). Rocky Mount Mill had more than 200 years of history and was the second oldest mill in North Carolina before its closure in 1996. Rocky Mount Mills witnessed segregation and slave labor, civil rights victory and integration, and the workforce's transformation from primarily white to primarily Black. CHW believed in the importance of preserving and reusing community histories for younger generations to better understand their history, present, and future. In this project, CHW collected oral histories from community members, developed lessons for K-12 education, produced narratives and videos, and created digital archives exhibiting family memorabilia and the above resources (*Adaptive reuse*, n.d.; Allam, 2019, April 23).

CHW's project demonstrated the importance of a long-time physical worksite and memories around it to the local community and the broader society. It prompted me to wonder how Chinese people could preserve their work histories meaningfully in the context of labor's geographical mobility and economic restructuring. The working contexts in China differed significantly from those in North Carolina. In China, the apparel industry is concentrated in coastal regions and attracts migrant workers from inland provinces. Migrants may leave their work sites and return to their home villages or cities after a period of employment. Additionally, in fast-paced development under economic restructuring, the physical worksites might acquire

new functions and even disappear for new development projects. Migration and restructuring create unique challenges to preserve community-grounded work histories in China.

Ultimately, my preliminary research in the U.S. helped me obtain embodied knowledge of the production process. It also informed my interest in considering the potential dark side of restructuring. This early fieldwork also drew attention to challenges related to retaining workers across generational changes. Together, these insights highlighted the need to examine apparel practitioners' occupational identity and be vigilant about overly positive framings of restructuring. My U.S. fieldwork experience also enabled me to identify shared challenges for apparel workers across countries. Finally, this preliminary research in the U.S. affirmed the need to situate the Chinese apparel manufacturing industry within its own contextual idiosyncrasies.

### **Suspending fieldwork during COVID-19**

As the above section shows, embodied participant observations can generate important insights. I had planned to continue fieldwork in China by visiting towns that hosted many apparel factories and interviewing workers in person. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted my plan, which broke out right around the 2020 Chinese Spring Festival. China entered into lockdown mode as I arrived in China ready to begin my field research. In the city where I stayed, all public transportation was suspended during the most severe time. People were not allowed to enter a different neighborhood, and country roads were blocked by stones, dirt, trees, or trucks. Even after the Spring Festival holiday, many villagers could not get out and return to work in cities due to road blockage. This strict stay-at-home order and self-imposed quarantine lasted about two months. Under this situation, virtual interviewing was the most feasible and ethical method to collect first-hand apparel practitioners' narratives.

After the lockdown order was lifted, I considered visiting factories multiple times but eventually gave up due to health concerns for myself and the research participants. As I was residing near Wuhan, the center of the pandemic in China, the possibility of me getting infected during travel was high. I worried that potential participants might not be willing to have contact with me. It was also unethical for me to interact with them, knowing that I could potentially spread the virus. As research time was limited for the dissertation project, I decided to suspend participant observations and rely on interviews for data collection.

### **Developing an interview-based study**

This research draws primarily on semi-structured in-depth interviews with apparel practitioners. Qualitative interviews enabled me to gain first-hand data centering on practitioners' perspectives (S. J. Tracy, 2013). In-depth interviews helped me elicit vivid, detailed accounts of participants' experiences, feelings, and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I opted out of ethnography, a typical method for studying factory workers (e.g., Hewamanne, 2008; Lynch, 2007). Apparel factories differ drastically regarding structural and organizational features (Gereffi, 1999), which have crucial impacts on workers' experiences. A single researcher cannot capture this broad range of experiences within the time limit through time-consuming ethnographies. By contrast, interviews with workers in different factory settings could help me gain varying situationally contingent perspectives. More specifically, interviews were well-suited for this study for their reliance on orality, potential to access history, and the adaptability of interview protocols.

### **The advantages of interviews: Orality, life narrative, and adaptability**

Interviewing as a form of oral communication was better suited for studying apparel manufacturing practitioners than methods requiring written communication. The practitioners'

age, education level, disposable time, and technological literacy intersected to shape their preferred communicative forms. Most of the current apparel practitioners were in their late 30s or 40s. Retired practitioners were over 50 years old. In general, these mid-aged and retired practitioners had a relatively low level of education and technological literacy. A couple of interviewees emphasized that they were slow in typing, so they preferred to use audio messages than typing characters. They were not good at typing words on mobile phones, not to mention posting their stories on internet forums. Their self-expressions were not readily available in online spaces. Moreover, current practitioners' prolonged work time restrained them from engaging in extra-work activities. Gaining their narratives thus required me to interact with them directly and preferably through oral communication.

More specifically, I adopted a life narrative approach to capture the processual nature of practitioners' identity and allow for emergent themes (Clandinin, 2007; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). A life narrative approach centers on the narrator's point of view and probes into people's past experiences. By adopting this approach, I not only asked questions about what people did now, but also inquired into their full employment history. I included questions such as how they got involved in apparel manufacturing, how they ended up where they were, and how their feelings had changed in their different employment segments. Doing so was important because apparel practitioners might be temporary workers and/or had multiple employment segments. Their current job position might not fully reveal their diverse work experiences, requiring me to situate their work identity in their whole employment history. Also, apparel workers' previous experience served as a reference point when making sense of their status quo. During the interviews, many participants contrasted their current working conditions with those in the past. The participants' accounts of their work history helped me better understand and interpret their



narratives about how they felt about their work at the time of the interview. Additionally, collecting life narratives from different generations enabled me to gain a historical perspective on the Chinese apparel manufacturing industry's general development.

My research also benefitted from adaptive interview protocols as my project involved multiple groups. I designed a general protocol and adapted it for different interviewees: front-line apparel workers, managers, and owners (see Appendix for protocols). More importantly, flexible interview protocols offered me space to incorporate participants' insights and voices as the research progresses. During the interview process, I updated my interview protocols several times as I gained new insight into the features of apparel manufacturing and workers' concerns. For example, initially, I did not question whether the factory is based on a whole-garment production or assembly-line mode. I added this aspect to the protocol after I learned from the first couple of interviews that this feature strongly influences workers' feelings about work.

### **Designing interview protocols**

With the goal of capturing emergent themes and situating workers' imaginations in their lived experiences, I broadened the interview protocols to cover a wide range of issues. Topics include work histories, compensation, workplace relationships, (dis)satisfaction, and planning. My protocols contained multiple types of questions to facilitate my conversations with the participants (S. J. Tracy, 2010). These diverse questions included: 1) timeline (e.g., when did you start the job?); 2) motives (e.g., how did you get involved in the apparel industry?); 3) compare–contrast (e.g., how is apparel work similar or different from other jobs you have done, if any?); 4) posing the ideal (e.g., what's your dream job?); 5) behavior and action (e.g., are you considering relocating your factory?); 6) hypothetical (e.g., if allowed to have a free tour in overseas factories, are you interested in participating?); 7) catch-all (e.g., did I cover all of your

concerns?); and 8) demographics (e.g., in which year were you born?). These different categories of questions allowed me to gain a range of insight into practitioners' meaning-making. Posing the ideal and hypothetical questions were particularly useful to solicit workers' comments on future-oriented desires, including "What is your dream job?" "Did/do you have plans to *zhuanhang* (start a different career, 转行)?" "What changes would you like to see in the apparel manufacturing industry?"

### **The limits of interviews**

While interviews were well suited for this study, like all methods they also had limits. First, participants' blurred memories prevented them from recalling all past experiences accurately. Nonetheless, their memories still provided important data for understanding their identity construction and retroactive sensemaking (S. J. Tracy, 2013). Second, participants might selectively present themselves to convey a positive image, as in the case of my interviews with U.S. factory owners. As such, I did not take interview data as facts but regarded them as narratives full of meanings requiring my interpretation (Alvesson, 2003). Third, and relatedly, my situated researcher positions shaped my data collection and analysis (Calafell, 2013; Jensen et al., 2019; Watts, 2006). Being trained in the U.S. academy, I struggled with my prejudice against blue-collar communication norms during the research process. My methodological training and conventional peer review criteria oriented me to vivid expressions and "rich data," which is often associated with lengthy interviews and transcripts (S. J. Tracy, 2010). Long, figurative talks are typical of white-collar communities (Gist-Mackey & Kingsford, 2020). My participants included both white-collar and blue-collar workers in apparel factories. I might have paid insufficient attention to direct, short, literal expressions and even silences by blue-collar workers. This self-critique provides one example of my self-reflexivity throughout the research

process, which involves “the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers’ past experience, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers’ interaction with, and interpretations of, the research scene” (S. J. Tracy, 2013, p. 2). To be transparent about my reflections (S. J. Tracy, 2010), I illustrate how my academic training, personal history, and political commitments have impacted the research process in more detail in a later session.

### **Negotiating human subject research approval**

As my research involves human subjects, I sought approval from UNC’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The institutional review’s ostensible purpose is to ensure researchers follow ethical principles and minimize harm to human subjects (S. J. Tracy, 2013). Even though it may have benevolent intentions, the institutional review process created particular challenges for my research. I discuss these “backstage” negotiations with the IRB to draw attention to how university policies may introduce challenges to research on vulnerable groups and with decolonizing commitments to participants’ autonomy (Smith, 2012). My examples also highlight difficulty translating the Chinese cultural context to gatekeepers in the U.S. My narratives presented below provide important insight into contingencies of qualitative research, challenging perpetuating norms of rationality and deductive logic that impede qualitative inquiries (Cruz, McDonald, Broadfoot, Chuang, & Ganesh, 2020; Jensen et al., 2019; S. Tracy, 2012).

First, the prolonged review process and conditional approval slowed down my research progress while also creating barriers to my initial plans. My IRB application went through full-board review as the IRB determined that my research involved vulnerable groups. U.S. apparel factories employed immigrant workers, whom the IRB deemed were subject to employment risk. Importantly, my IRB imposed a requirement that I not only submit managerial approval for any factory tours to the IRB and obtain individual approval prior to each of my proposed factory

visits. After following this requirement for two factory tours, I found the prior review especially cumbersome and unnecessary. I submitted a request to remove it, arguing that the prior review process would leave more traces and post more risk to research participants. However, the reviewer denied my request without explanation. After I attempted to ask for their rationales in my formal responses to the IRB, the reviewer told me over the phone that I was not allowed to ask questions in my responses. Eventually, I failed to persuade the IRB to remove securing prior approval from them to embark on factory visits. These details reveal how U.S.-based university IRB policies shaped and constrained my research designs and research processes.

### **Denying participants' autonomy**

My endeavor to ensure participants' autonomy and safety was also compromised in other ways during my university IRB application process. My initial application stated that I would honor any participants who explicitly requested that I reveal their identity, otherwise defaulting to the use of pseudonyms. I made the exception because of an episode in my previous research experience, in which an interviewee asked me to use his real name in my research report. He said many researchers had written about him and that he was not worried about revealing his identity. However, I was not able to honor his request given the IRB-initiated requirement to use pseudonyms. Again, IRB rejected my attempt to honor participants' autonomy in making such decisions. I argued against the IRB's decision over a phone call with my reviewer:

Reviewer: It's black and white. The Board believes there is no benefit to the participants for them to reveal their identity.

Jing: I don't agree. The researcher gets all the credit for research while participants do not.

Reviewer: Understandable. That's why we need a Full Board review. It's the Board's decision. You have to follow what you write in the consent form—not reveal the participant's identity.

At that moment, I felt powerless in the face of the IRB's rule. After a prolonged negotiation, I really wanted to obtain approval to start my study. So, I gave up further negotiation and complied with the IRB stipulation.

In this case, the IRB held on to the procedural ethics of ensuring confidentiality, an undoubted right of the participants in conventional research (S. J. Tracy, 2013). However, the IRB ignored situational ethics—those arising in specific contexts or sample (S. J. Tracy, 2013, p. 243) and participants' right of autonomy—an important consideration in burgeoning discussions on decolonizing methodologies (C. R. Hale, 2001; Parker, Dennison, Smith, & Jackson, 2017; Sangtin Writers Collective & Nagar, 2006). Honoring participants' contribution and giving them due credit required new understandings of publicity and confidentiality beyond the IRB conceptions of confidentiality as protection and publicity as harm.

### **Falsely equating transparency with protection**

While the IRB associated publicity with harm, it failed to recognize the risk of being transparent to academic institutions in a different cultural context. As I navigated my university IRB's policies on local approval, I quickly learned that the IRB assumed the benevolence of academic institutions and academic research. My university IRB insisted that I secure the approval of a local Chinese equivalent of an IRB, assuming that local academic institutions would ensure that I met ethical requirements, thus providing greater protection for participants. However, this requirement conflicts with norms in Chinese social scientific research where IRB review was not required in non-biomedical research. When I sought additional guidance, the IRB analyst I spoke to responded that other Chinese students provided such documentation, and that it was also my responsibility to obtain one. Although there are good reasons to ensure that research is being conducted ethically and with oversight, in this case, my university's insistence

on requiring additional local approval only paid lip service to the protection of participants. My university's IRB had no ability to oversee or evaluate the quality of local approvals.

My university's insistence on a local IRB approval could be interpreted more as shifting legal risk for the university instead of providing substantive protection of research participants (Dempsey, 2009a). Moreover, seeking a local IRB approval could potentially alert the government of my research on factory workers, potentially increasing risk to workers. The Chinese government is susceptible to workers' collective action and has been cracking down on civil organizations assisting workers recently (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014). The IRB worried that the researcher might pose a risk to the subjects but did not consider the threat of greater transparency from formal institutions. While IRB interprets "transparency" as protection, "transparency" is associated with risk for surveillance from the government in China. I eventually met the IRB stipulation by securing local approval through a personal connection I had at a Chinese university. Even though this approval was less likely to pose additional risk to the participants in my research, obtaining it brought no additional benefits to them, either. My example on local approval illuminates difficulties in translating cultural context when conducting international research. Together, my negotiations with the IRB illustrated that how institutional power and biases shaped my research trajectories. Recruiting online via personal connections

Gaining trust from potential subjects was critically important during my study's recruitment process. As my recruitment began during the COVID-19 pandemic, online methods helped me avoid physical contact and minimize health risks. To begin, I shared my recruitment notice on WeChat (*Weixin*, 微信), the most popular instant message app in China.<sup>14</sup> My recruitment notice was featured on my WeChat public account (*gongzhonghao*, 公众号),

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<sup>14</sup> Statistics on the number of users here.

allowing it to be disseminated easily on WeChat. Many people in my personal connections shared the notice, connecting me with potential participants and helping me gain trust from them. I also employed snowball sampling by asking participants to recommend other participants (S. J. Tracy, 2013).

My recruitment notice improved with constructive criticisms from my friends and strangers. I first created temporary files to get advice from my academic friends, who pushed me to be more concise and precise about my research purpose, interview questions, and inclusion criteria. After taking their advice, I shared the notice with the public. Then two strangers provided helpful comments on my notice. One pointed out that my phrase “no monetary compensation” sounded too cold. When writing that phrase, my focus was on brevity, not my tone. In response to that comment, I replaced the phrase with “Due to financial constraints, I am not able to provide compensation, but I hope to document and tell your story.” In this new phrasing, my wish to report participants’ stories was added because of a comment from another stranger, who asked me what people could gain from participating in my research.

Additionally, this stranger highlighted an issue of my credibility by asking me, “How can I believe you are whom you claim to be?” I responded that I could provide proof from my university’s website. Then they advised me to add my UNC webpage link and a screenshot of the webpage to the recruitment notice. I followed their advice, which helped me to recruit an interviewee later, who initially questioned my identity. I told him that he could check my photo and web link in the recruitment notice. Upon hearing my response, this subject agreed to participate in my study. These two conversations around my identity suggest that the researcher’s credibility is earned and cannot be assumed.

My personal connections also played a critical role in helping me overcome the issue of credibility. After posting my recruitment notice to the Wechat public account, I shared it on my moments and with multiple chat groups on WeChat. Upon seeing my notice, many of my family members, schoolmates, and other friends helped disseminate my recruitment notice to their connections, especially those in the apparel industry. Potential subjects recruited via my personal connections did not question my credibility, suggesting that they extended their trust to me due to mediated personal relationships.

While personal connections facilitated my recruitment and interviews, one case in my study also illustrated the potential undue influence of relying on personal networks. A relative of mine recommended an interviewee to me, who during the interview recalled losing her child in a fire while working away from my home. Later, my relative told me that she felt apologetic about forgetting the interviewee's trauma, which initially made the interviewee reluctant to participate in my study. After hearing my relative's reflection, I suspected that she tried hard to persuade the interviewee into participating because of my assistance with her fundraising a couple of years ago. Even though I did not ask any specific individual to share my recruitment notice, my relative might have felt obligated to help me to reciprocate my former favor. Thus, reciprocity in personal connections compromised the voluntary nature of assisting my recruitment in this case. Furthermore, my relative and the interviewee were also relatives, which prompted the interviewee to participate despite her reluctance. As such, the voluntary nature of participation was also compromised. Fortunately, this case was atypical; most of the interviewees contacted me proactively and were willing to share their stories.



## **Interview data overview and analysis**

### **Overview of interviews**

Despite interruptions brought by COVID-19, I was fortunate to gather a significant amount of data through online recruitment via personal connections to accomplish this project. I conducted 25 interviews with current and former practitioners in Chinese apparel factories. We had the conversations in Mandarin. These interviews mainly took place virtually via synchronous audio chat. One was conducted face to face; one via text messages; one via a combination of audio and text messages. The interviews lasted 70 minutes on average, varying from 35 to 140 minutes. All interviews based on audio chat were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcription process combined my labor, machine-based transcription, and human assistance. I transcribed two interviews fully. The rest relied on a machine-based service, which generated transcripts for my review and correction. As some transcripts were inaccurate due to the quality of recordings, I utilized a professional transcription service to improve these transcripts' accuracy. Altogether, the interviews generated over 330 pages of single-spaced transcripts.

### **Adopting an iterative approach**

My data analysis adopted an iterative approach, as traversing between theories and research data provides promising opportunities for theory building (S. J. Tracy, 2013). My analysis began during data collection, manifesting in my modification of interview protocols and research memo writing. Upon concluding the interviews, I coded five interview transcripts to develop a codebook and major themes around imagination, constraints, upgrading, and methodology. Then I engaged in axial coding, that is, collecting interview segments for the themes, respectively (S. J. Tracy, 2013). Combining emerging insights and existing readings allowed me to identify gaps in the literature. For example, contrasting extant studies and

participants' narratives about apparel work revealed the lack of sufficient attention to imagination in the literature on work identities, prompting me to argue for imagination as a dimension of occupational identity.

Several strategies facilitated my analysis and theory building. I experimented with freewriting, poem writing, and the Pentad, a dramaturgical strategy (S. J. Tracy, 2013), which all helped organize my thoughts when I felt stuck. I also employed prospective conjecture (S. J. Tracy, 2013), which involves creatively using theoretical juxtapositions to develop new lenses that can account for emerging insight from my data. For example, in Chapter 6, juxtaposing literature on upgrading and development idealism inspired the concept "upgrading idealism" to capture participants' desires for upgrading. In the analysis and writing process, I also maintained memos to document my inspirations and stop points, generating over 50 pages of notes.

Maintaining research memos helped me keep track of recruitment and engage in preliminary analysis. For each interview, my research memos consisted of six parts: 1) research process (e.g., recruitment, preparation, feeling, obstacles, opportunities); 2) information gathered but not recorded during the interview; 3) interesting observations and findings; 4) cross-examinations of interviews; 5) to-do items for following interviews; and 6) reflections on research in general. These memos generated 70 pages of single-spaced writing. In cross-examining interviews, I employed constant comparison to tease out similarities and differences between cases. Initial themes emerged during the comparison, allowing me to check them against the following interviews. As new interviews continued to affirm the key findings, I recognized data saturation and thus concluded recruitment and interviews.

### **Reflecting on my positionality**

Iterative interpretations of data also prompted me to reflect on my own positionality, including how biases were shaping my interpretations. For example, my focus on factory work reflected my concern that organizational communication research had abandoned a focus on factory work in favor of service-based forms of work. When beginning to critique forms of development idealism in the process of developing Chapter 6, I realized that I, too, may have been bringing the same kinds of optimism about factory work found in early development discourses. This demonstrated the importance of self-reflexivity and disclosing my own positionality. As said earlier, the researcher's worldviews and positionality shape their interpretation of data and the research outcome. While self-reflexivity helped identify my biases to a certain degree, there also existed blind spots and assumptions I have not recognized.

Some discussion of my own background and academic training provides further insight. Coming from a working-class family, I have long been concerned about how research can respond to ordinary workers' rights and well-being. In college, I pursued interview-based research highlighting the experiences of campus dining workers, rural former miners diagnosed with black lung, and ordinary municipal workers. My Master's thesis employed an ethnographic method to document the joys and sorrows of Chinese students working in a U.S. summer work travel program. My early research experience stressed the need to gain first-hand workers' narratives, which often provided nuanced descriptions of tensions and dilemmas and challenged dominant overly optimistic discourses about work and development. On a summer research fellowship during my early doctoral training, I investigated Chinese taxi drivers who were striking for better working conditions. These projects not only provided me opportunities to gain insight about working conditions from a range of workers, but also informed how I came to

choose a qualitative approach allowing for a focus on worker's experiences. These initial experiences also helped me build my interview, transcription, and observation skills that proved helpful in shaping how I approached my research design. In addition, thanks to my working-class background, many of my relatives have prior connections with apparel factory workers. These networks facilitated my recruitment and helped build trust with participants.

My experiences living in the U.S. also played a role in my strengthening my commitment to understanding the experiences of Chinese manufacturing workers' experiences under changing socio-economic conditions like restructuring. Witnessing the aftermath of the decline of the Detroit metropolitan areas while in my Master's program prompted me to wonder whether Chinese economic restructuring would bring the same fate to millions of Chinese workers. Furthermore, being a Chinese national studying in the U.S. allowed me to traverse geographical and cultural boundaries between China and the U.S. My bilingual skills enabled me to talk to both Americans and Chinese and gain unique insight. In addition, my sustained engagement with critical theoretical perspectives, including postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and feminist perspectives throughout my graduate career, influenced the critical direction I took. Together, these experiences, background, and personalized history all bear on my approach to the topics of this study.

### **Presenting to inform, impress, and influence**

I thought carefully about presenting findings and developed 3 "I"s to guide my presentation—to inform, impress and influence. The first goal of the presentation was to inform the reader of my research findings, focusing on what is new, unfamiliar, and interesting. Second, I hoped to impress, that is, to create resonance through aesthetic representations and evoking emotional reactions from readers (S. J. Tracy, 2010). Third, to influence meant changing

scholarly perspectives, creating new research terrains, shifting individual behaviors, or transforming policies. These three goals were complementary: informative and impressive representations laid the foundation for the ultimate goal of influence; keeping the purpose of influence on the mind prompted me to take the contents and forms of presentation seriously.

### **Good vs. bad stories**

As my study involved relatively marginalized manufacturing workers, I paid close attention to how I framed research participants' narratives. My approach is built on scholarly reflections about the significance of good vs. bad stories in academic research. For example, when illustrating the harm of poverty using participants' accounts about child neglect, welfare fraud, and addiction, researchers risk writing bad stories if they merely center on individual malpractices (de Souza, 2020, p. 1). These bad stories could become good ones by situating individual issues within broader social problems. However, good stories still "risk further pathologizing poor communities" (de Souza, 2020, p. 1), as reiterating problems, in the long run, can potentially create negative self-appraisals and diminish community members' agency. These problem-focused stories, or "damage-centered research," resemble litigation discourses that highlight pain and loss to attract material resources (Tuck, 2009). Researchers often write these stories for people in positions of power with good intentions. These stories may be impactful, but they miss community members' need for hope and vision. For example, a student with a low-income family background felt disappointed after failing to find victory stories in de Souza's book on the poor communities. De Souza recognized that she should have written stories for communities themselves and paid more attention to hope (de Souza, 2020). A "desire-centered research framework" can help remedy the negligence by drawing attention to hope, desire, and victory stories (Tuck, 2009).

From this literature addressing good vs. bad stories, I took away four key insights. First, while I was concerned about injustices and inequality suffered by apparel workers, I tried to avoid presenting them as deficient. For example, when brainstorming terms to capture emerging themes, I thought of “imagination deficit,” “impoverished imagination,” “deprived imagination,” and “poverty of imagination.” These terms were disregarded because readers might link them to the mindset of the poor (*qiongren siwei*, 穷人思维), a common colloquial term suggesting a problematic psychological state among the impoverished communities. Instead, I chose “constrained imagination” to draw attention to structural features shaping and constraining imagination away from individual psychological attributes.

The second lesson was to search for and highlight victory stories rather than only presenting overwhelmingly daunting narratives. With this consideration, I incorporated participants’ stories about emancipation and transformation. Third, and relatedly, to make my research accessible to the participants’ communities, I needed to write in their language. An interviewee expressed interest in reading her stories, although an English language dissertation would be inaccessible to her. Thus, I planned to provide Chinese summaries of my research after completing my dissertation. Last, the critique of the damage-centered approach confirmed my argument about the lack of attention to subjectivity in extant scholarship; the call for a desire-centered approach demonstrated the significance of my interrogation of imagination. Taken together, I tried to balance positive and negative presentations in writing, considering their multifaceted impacts on research communities.

### **Using exemplars and visuals**

To deliver the findings in vivid, evocative ways, I relied on exemplars and visuals. Exemplars are vivid episodes told or experienced by the participants that resemble significant

themes in the study (S. J. Tracy, 2013). My data chapters opened with an exemplar, in which the extremes and dilemmas were likely to evoke readers' emotional reactions and provoke their interest in my research. To improve clarity and leave strong impressions on readers, I also used visuals, such as photos, tables, and graphs.

### **Crafting pseudonyms with cultural resources**

My considerations about how to write about research participants were also reflected in the pseudonyms I crafted. Traditional Chinese culture inspired my creation of these names. I first obtained twenty-four family names from the well-known *A Collection of Family Names* (*baijiaxing*, 百家姓) and then created given names using twelve Chinese zodiacs, five directions (east, west, south, north, and center), five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and dirt), and words for the weather. These Chinese characters have corresponding pinyin (phonetic symbols for Chinese characters). If their pinyin is repetitive, I only preserved one to avoid confusion. For example, the Chinese zodiac rabbit (*tu*, 兔) and the element dirt (*tu*, 土) share the same pinyin. I eliminated “tu” for rabbit and only used “tu” for dirt. As “tu” is a short syllable, I duplicated it and made “tutu” as the final given name. After matching the family names and given names, I assigned the full names to the participants in the order of the interview, leaving no association between the pseudonyms and the participants' identities. With matching Chinese characters, these pseudonyms could be easily turned into Chinese when I present my research in Chinese in the future.

### **Translating to enrich languages**

My research involved translations back and forth between the English and Chinese languages, which was both a challenge and an opportunity. For example, participants used Chinese words with contextual meanings that are hard to translate precisely in English. Initially, I

was frustrated with language gaps and upset about my incapacity to translate certain Chinese words into English. However, I obtained a new perspective after receiving advice from scholars who presented their China-based research in English. As Kang and Rawlins (2017) nicely put it, “Translation does not only refer to locating and correlating one word from one language to another, but also an ongoing meaning creating process (even within one language family)...That is, it is the differences rising in translation that we should be able to appreciate and celebrate when we are trying to represent languages and worlds of others” (p. 7). This quote highlights the need for translators’ positive appraisal of the differences between languages. It also emphasizes translators’ contribution to both languages as they can introduce new meanings to the presenting language and gain more in-depth insight into the translated language.

With this new perspective, I viewed myself as a contributor to the English language by introducing the Chinese meanings that cannot be translated into English precisely. To do so, I incorporated some Chinese characters when translating to preserve their original meaning (see Appendix). Certainly, I was building on the shoulders of former scholars. For example, research has explicated the notions of *suzhi* (*quality*, 素质), *timian* (*decent*, 体面), and *dagong* (work for a boss, 打工). My translation built and extended this previous scholarship (e.g., Long et al., 2016; Westwood & Lok, 2003). In the meantime, I also gained deeper knowledge about how ordinary folks used the Chinese language. Such knowledge enabled me to develop Table 1, illustrating two ways of using pinyin in this dissertation.



**Table 1**

## Translation and the Use of Pinyin

<b>English translation (<i>pinyin</i>, Chinese characters)</b>			
Application	Examples	Notes	
Chinese words with equivalent English words; Chinese words whose meanings can be translated into English.	horizon ( <i>yanjie</i> , 眼界) the reward for showing up to all shifts ( <i>quanqin jiang</i> , 全勤奖).	Even though these Chinese words' meanings can be captured in English, I want to show the original characters used by the participants to improve clarity.	I use English translations after the first illustration.
<b><i>Pinyin</i> (English translation, Chinese characters)</b>			
Application	Examples	Notes	
Words with meanings that are unique to the Chinese context.	<i>danwei</i> (work unit, 单位)	The meanings of these words require lengthy, detailed contextualization.	After the first full illustration, I only use pinyin in the following references.
Words that function more like fillers. The original meanings may or may not be applicable to the context.	<i>yinwei</i> (because, 因为) <i>bijiao</i> (kind of, 比较) <i>ranhou</i> (then, 然后) <i>fanzheng</i> (anyway, 反正)	Some participants may start many sentences with these filler words, compromising their original meanings.	Ibid

## **Participants demographics**

My interviewees consisted of 14 female-identified participants and 11 male-identified participants. All but one is of Han ethnicity. Among them, 11 came from Hunan Province, and the rest came from nine other provinces. Ages varied between 21 and 61, with the majority aged at 30-50 (see Table 2). Their earliest work history started in 1983 (see Table 3). Most of them entered the apparel manufacturing industry in the 2000s. The number of years they worked for apparel manufacturing ranged from two to more than 20.

Interviewees occupied a range of job positions in apparel factories, including designer, pattern-maker, sewers, ironer, warehouse keeper, accountant, order tracker, line leader, department manager, top manager, and owner. The scale of factories they owned or worked for ranged from about ten workers to more than 2000 workers, most of which was under 100 workers. Out of the 27 factories the interviewees discussed, 16 adopted assembly lines, and 11 employed the whole-garment production mode (see Table 3).

**Table 2**

Participant Demographics Part One

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Gender	N
F	14
M	11
Age group	N
20-29	2
30-39	11
40-49	9
50-59	2
60+	1
Years of first entry to apparel factories	N
1980-1989	2
1990-1999	3
2000-2009	14
2010-2019	5
N/A	1

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**Table 3**

## Participant Demographics Part Two

Number of years in apparel factories	
Former Practitioners	N
5 and below	4
6--10	4
11--15	4
Current Practitioners	
1--9	3
10--19	5
20+	4
NA	1
	Number of factories discussed (N=28)
Mode of production	
Whole-garment making factories	11
Assembly-line based factories	16
*experienced both modes	3
N/A (#11)	1

In conclusion, my study primarily draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with current and former practitioners in Chinese apparel factories. Before conducting interviews in China, I also engaged in fieldwork in the U.S. More specifically, I conducted factory tours, visited museums, attended public events, and interviewed factory owners and other stakeholders. These experiences provided me preliminary understandings of the global apparel manufacturing industry and facilitated my research in China. My research involved prolonged negotiation with IRB: lengthy review processes delayed my research progress; existing IRB rules denied participants' autonomy and falsely equated transparency with protection. To conduct my research, I made several compromises to obtain approval. The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic also changed my research trajectory in that I had to give up planned participant observation due to health risks, coordination difficulties, and time constraints. During the pandemic, online methods enabled me to recruit participants via personal connections and conduct interviews

virtually. Maintaining research memos facilitated my data analysis during and after data collection. After distilling themes through an iterative approach, I guided my presentation by 3“I”s—to inform, impress, and influence. These overlapping goals drew attention to the contents, forms, and impacts of presentations, shaping my use of exemplars and visuals in the data chapters. Taken together, my preliminary fieldwork in the U.S., my interviews with Chinese practitioners, and iterative analysis yielded two major themes that I take up in the following chapters: constrained imagination and upgrading idealism.

## CHAPTER 5: CONSTRAINED IMAGINATION: CENTERING SPATIAL-TEMPORAL AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON CHINESE APPAREL MANUFACTURING PRACTITIONERS

I feel if people stay in an apparel factory too long, their horizon (*yanjie*, 眼界), *xinxiong* (heart and mind, 心胸) will become kind of, kind of narrow. Really, if you stay in a factory too long, your *xinxiong* will both become narrow.

The opening quote is from Yang Zhang, a sewer in apparel factories from 2007 to 2020. Drawing on her experience, Yang Zhang described how working in a factory setting over time can lead to a narrowing of the heart and mind. This quote provides a poignant description of the shaping of one's capacity to imagine. Yang Zhang's compelling quote crystallizes a key theme narrated by my combined participants: constrained imagination, which captures how worker's future-oriented desires were shaped by spatial-temporal constraints in factory work and broader structural conditions.

Attending to workers' constrained imagination is of theoretical and practical significance. Discussing imagination enhances scholarship on work identities by contributing novel insight into control and resistance at the site of workers' subjective realms. My research increases our understandings of apparel workers' negative feelings about their work due to constrained imagination. More importantly, constrained imagination helps explain apparel workers' commitment to their factory work despite their dissatisfactions with that work, adding new insight to discussions of workers' agency.

Practically, calling attention to Chinese factory workers' constrained imagination provides necessary counter-narratives to academic and public discourses that convey overly optimistic accounts of migrant workers' mobility and agency (Ban, 2018). For example, Yan

(2008) called labor mobility “the third liberation” (p. 124),<sup>15</sup> claiming that and working in the cities liberated Chinese peasants’ minds as they encountered new ideas, concepts, and business modes. However, my research highlights how migrant factory workers understand their own agency and mobility as constrained. Recognition of the boundaries of workers’ imagination can play an important role in broader discussions of worker well-being in factory work.

This chapter begins by discussing two particular manifestations of what I develop as “constrained imagination.” They involve constrained career aspirations and constrained ideas about the possibilities of industrial transformation. Then, I parse out how spatial-temporal configurations of factory work and structural features in the Chinese context played a role in workers’ constrained imagination. The next data section includes ways participants felt the constraints lessened up and their imagination expanded. To conclude this chapter, I bridge the emerging theme “constrained imagination” with key insights developed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three to highlight its theoretical implications.

### **Constrained imagination as work identity among apparel workers**

Participants in this study, especially production workers, offered numerous examples of constrained imagination. Two key manifestations related to their constrained career aspirations and constrained imagination about industrial transformation in apparel work. As for constrained career aspirations, participants disliked apparel work, but they did not imagine a clear, viable alternative career for themselves. In other words, they developed a desire to pursue different jobs. Still, their desire was vague and felt unachievable to them. Similarly, many participants did not imagine an improved future of the apparel manufacturing industry. Even if they identified

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<sup>15</sup> The first liberation refers to the political (1949, national independence and following land reform); the second refers to the economic (1979, the dissolution of rural communes).

needed improvements, they did not imagine themselves as agents in facilitating such changes. I will begin with constrained career aspirations.

### **Constrained career aspirations**

Many participants disliked apparel work and aspired to a different career. However, they often did not have a clear sense of the desired career or felt constrained to pursue their aspirations. For example, I asked Yang Zhang, a former sewer mentioned in the introduction, if she had jobs that she wanted to undertake before assuming a factory job. She responded, “I did not have a very clear sense of what I wanted to do.” Yang’s reply suggests that she did not have a desired career before assuming apparel work. I further probed into her imagined alternative career during her tenure as a sewer:

Jing Jiang: Have you thought about pursuing a different career?

Yang Zhang: Yes. But I don’t know. Now I am older. I don’t know what I should do.

Jing Jiang: You know there are other factories. Have you considered entering other factories?

Yang Zhang: You mean other industries, right?

Jing Jiang: Or other factories.

Yang Zhang: Factories in other industries, right?

Jing Jiang: Yes.

Yang Zhang: If I had to enter a factory again, I would still have chosen apparel factories.

Jing Jiang: Why?

Yang Zhang: If I had to enter a factory again, I would still have chosen apparel factories because I am familiar with this industry. I have know-hows.

Jing Jiang: If you had to enter a factory, you would have needed to learn from the beginning. You have the cost of learning.

Yang Zhang: Yes.

Our conversation reveals that Yang Zhang had aspired to a different career, but in reality, she would still choose apparel work over other manufacturing industries. Yang felt that she was constrained by her age and skill, and she would not be willing to bear the cost of learning to enter a different industry. Echoing Yang’s comment on the narrowing of heart and mind, Yang was not



able to imagine a possible different career despite her discontent in apparel work. Yang developed a desire for an alternative mode of living, but her desire fell short of being clear and actionable. Similarly, Feng Zhao, a former sewer, also expressed her lack of a desired career during her tenure as an apparel worker, “What I wanted to do? I really did not have any idea at that time... (My job) was what I did not want. But I had to do it for a living. That was it.” Feng Zhao clearly knew her negative feeling toward her job as a sewer on the assembly line, but she did not have clear aspirations for different careers.

Some participants showed clearer aspirations than Feng and Yang, but their aspirations still remained broad and felt difficult to achieve. My conversation with Jinjin You, a former worker and manager, provided an example:

Jing Jiang: Did you have a dream job then?

Jinjin You: Yes. I wanted to find a better, better-paid industry that could enable me to support my family. I thought about that.

Jing Jiang: What options did you have?

Jinjin You: Because of the lack of adequate *tiaojian* (conditions, 条件), I might not have choices.

Jing Jiang: You just had this idea of finding a different industry. You did not want to work in the apparel factory.

Jinjin You: This industry was indeed too *xinku* (tiring, 辛苦). You can't make enough money.

Dissatisfied with tiring work and low pay in apparel work, Jinjin You developed a desire for a career in a different industry that paid better to support his family. However, Jinjin You did not know what industries were available to him, and he felt constrained by limited conditions to choosing a different industry. Jinjin You did not specify what he meant by limited *tiaojian* (conditions, 条件). Despite this, my analysis in later sections will offer insight into various constraints on him. The feeling of not having a viable alternative was also expressed by Mumu Shi, a former sewer, when responding to my question whether he considered pursuing a career in a different industry:

I did when I was working (in an apparel factory). However, I felt, for example, electronics factories had many regulations and were rigid. I did not want to go to an electronic factory. (In the apparel factory,) it was OK to be a little late. It was simple to ask for leaves. No one *diao ni* (give you trouble, 扁你).

Mumu Shi worked as a temporary sewer in different apparel factories. He considered a career in an alternative industry but did not identify a suitable one. He compared apparel factories with electronics factories and disliked the less flexible time structure and more rigid supervision in electronics factories. We can decipher Mumu Shi's constrained career aspirations in two ways. First, Mumu Shi was constrained by the lack of better alternative careers in society, highlighting social constraints. Second, Mumu Shi only mentioned electronics factories as his reference points but did not consider a wide range of job opportunities beyond factory work. This latter aspect foregrounded Mumu's limited horizon, a feature of apparel workers illustrated by Yang Zhang. Notably, I am not suggesting that constrained imagination is a psychological attribute of the individual here. I will demonstrate the formation of constrained imagination in organizational and social contexts later.

Altogether, examples in this section demonstrate that apparel workers' career aspirations were constrained. Even though they disliked apparel work and desired to exit, they did not imagine a clear alternative career for themselves. Their narratives provide a glimpse into how such constrained imagination was shaped by limited resources and harsh working conditions. As apparel workers were dissatisfied with current working conditions, I was curious about whether they hoped for better conditions in the future and what pathways they imagined to achieve those goals. However, my interviews further revealed that apparel workers' imagination regarding the future of the apparel manufacturing industry was also constrained.

### **Constrained imagination for industrial transformation**

Many participants did not imagine a different future of the apparel industry or imagine their role in transforming the apparel industry. Such phenomena were particularly prominent among frontline production workers. For example, when responding to my question about her desired future of apparel manufacturing, Feng Zhao stated:

I have not thought about it. To be honest, those things do not matter to us ordinary folks (*laobaixing*, 老百姓). Right? Not issues that we ordinary folks consider. So, I do not think about these things at all.

Feng regarded herself as an ordinary person whose concerns did not include industrial transformations. She did not develop her imagination about the desired future of apparel manufacturing. Feng implicitly designated industrial changes as tasks for those with power. By contrast, Mumu Shi explicitly stated so in our conversation:

Jing Jiang: When you worked (in the apparel factory), had you thought about hoping to improve your working conditions (*huanjing*, 环境) and compensation (*daiyu*, 待遇)?

Mumu Shi: Of course, I had. Who doesn't want to have a better income? But this is not up to me. I do not have that capacity. So, I drifted with the current (*suibo zhuliu*, 随波逐流).

Jing Jiang: If things need to be improved, what or who do you think now that you can depend on?

Mumu Shi: If things need to be improved, I feel no one can be depended on. If you can become president and alike, maybe you have the capacity. If not, it's not going to work.

Similar to Feng, Mumu did not see his capacity for shaping the working conditions in the industry. His view on his role in promoting social change was well illustrated by the idiom “drifting with the current.” This metaphor means following social trends rather than leading, challenging, or counteracting them. As such, this term reveals Mumu Shi's pragmatism in accepting social changes but passiveness in facilitating industrial transformations. This metaphor also suggests movements that are not purposeful or progressive as one could drift back and forth

along with the current. Additionally, floating on water rather than being settled implies instability and the lack of anchor in life. Overall, this metaphor reflects the temporary nature of Mumu Shi's job positions and his migrant status in the region where he worked. The lack of reliable social networks also contributed to Mumu's perspective that no one could be counted on to improve his working conditions. He believed that only powerful politicians such as China's president had the capacity to shape the industry. However, there was no guarantee that they would utilize their power to improve apparel manufacturing. In short, despite his desire for better payment, Mumu Shi did not imagine an improved future of apparel manufacturing. Nor did he perceive his agency to shape the future of apparel manufacturing.

Participants' constrained imagination about the industry's future was intersected with their individualist approach to change. They focused on what they should do to improve their well-being within existing conditions rather than how these conditions should be transformed.

My conversation with Quan Kong, a current sewer, reflected this:

Jing Jiang: What changes do you want to see in apparel manufacturing? What kind of work time and work compensation do you think are fair?

Quan Kong: How to put this in words? Who doesn't hope for change? I also want to make money. I also want to be rich. What can be changed?! (If you) get too comfortable, your income gets lower. If you don't make enough, you don't want to do it anymore.

My question inquired about Quan Kong's desire for the future of apparel manufacturing.

However, Quan's answer focused on personal endeavors for a better life. Quan first acknowledged that desires for change were common and that she desired a better financial status.

Then her statement, "What can be changed?!" expressed strong disbelief in achieving positive changes in the industry. As Quan did not imagine industrial changes, Quan drew attention to individual work ethics and personal income. Quan stated that if one worked less, their income would be less, and they would be discouraged from engaging in apparel work, implying that hard

work was necessary for apparel workers to ensure adequate income and motivation. Quan Kong's desire for a better life was constrained within her personal endeavor, not involving broader changes in the industry.

For another example, Yang Zhang expressed similar beliefs about desire and individual investment. When I asked whom she could count on to improve her working conditions and compensation, Yang responded, "You mean that if I were in a factory and I wanted to improve my work compensation, right? I don't think about depending on others. I should count on my own endeavor." Yang believed in her hard work to improve her income, embracing an independent and individualist approach to change. Continuing our conversation, I prompted Yang Zhang to comments on needed improvements in the whole industry. She stated, "The most important aspect is the time matter. Work time is indeed too long. Also, the income needs to be increased. Income in the whole industry needs to increase." Yang articulated the needed changes in the industry. I followed up by asking where the changes should start. In her response, she placed her hope on powerful actors:

Changes should start from the bosses (*laoban*, 老板), because we production workers, we production workers should have difficulty in changing these. The government, all aspects of the government, all departments should supervise these factories. Maybe it depends on the owners' self-discipline. To change this, (we have to) count on the bosses.

Similar to Mumu Shi, Yang Zhang did not perceive production workers' agency in changing their working conditions and believed in the power of the government in supervising factories to implement changes. In contrast to Mumu, Yang also pointed out the important role played by factory owners in improving factories' working conditions. Yang thought the owners needed self-discipline. While Yang articulated clearer desired changes in the industry and showed less pessimism than Quan Kong and Mumu Shi, she still attributed a passive role to production

workers and placed faith in the owners and the government in facilitating industrial transformations. In brief, production workers' imagination about the industry's future was constrained in that they did not perceive a better alternative or they did not see their role in working toward that future if they imagined one.

Participants in managerial positions also provided examples of constrained imagination about industrial transformation, as noted by Yinyin Tao, a former sewer and current director of back processes:

Regarding what needs to be changed, I have not thought about large-scale changes. In daily activities, I generally think about how to make quality products with better means. I have not thought about other changes.

Yinyin Tao concentrated on improving work processes to ensure product quality in his factory on a daily basis but did not imagine long-term, broader changes in the whole industry. Yinyin Tao's desires for an improved future were constrained in his immediate workplace. As a manager, Yinyin Tao was more concerned about improving product quality than production workers' compensation. In response to my question about what changes should be there to improve workers' compensation, he stated:

People in apparel manufacturing all depend on time investment (*yong shijian qumo*, 用时间去磨). Regarding an order's piece rate and alike, (they) can't be changed. The reason is that, regarding an order, the customers choose what kind of orders to give you, easy or hard to make. The reason is that the factories have no choice.

Yinyin Tao imagined no room to improve the piece rate and thus no way to shorten production workers' work hours. With current piece rates, workers needed to extend their work hours to make adequate income. Yinyin Tao perceived that piece rates were mostly dependent on the price of garments offered by customers. He did not imagine factories' capacity to push the price limit of their products and thus improve workers' piece rates. In short, Yinyin Tao desired gradual

work process improvements but did not articulate an alternative future of the apparel manufacturing industry.

Whether about personal careers or industrial transformations, participants' future-oriented desires were limited in that their desires often were vague and not actionable. They were either pessimistic about the future or showed passive understandings of their agency in facilitating positive change. They felt constrained by various limits to pursue alternative careers or improve the whole industry. Next, I illustrate key constraints that shaped participants' constrained imagination.

### **Spatial-temporal and structural constraints on imagination**

Participants' narratives yielded two significant constraints on their imagination. One centered on the spatial-temporal configurations of apparel factories, echoing Yang Zhang's comment on apparel work's constraining effects on workers' heart and mind. The other constraint related to broader structural conditions in China, reflecting the limited choices felt by Jinjin You, Mumu Shi, and Yinyin Tao. To begin, I illustrate how spatial-temporal features of apparel work shaped workers' imagination.

#### **Spatial-temporal configurations of apparel work**

Participants highlighted that apparel work was marked by a prolonged stay in a confined space, which as a result, constrained their imagination. I will first offer an example to illustrate this general spatial-temporal configuration of apparel work and then delve into a more detailed analysis of factors shaping these features.

#### ***Spatial trap and temporal bind***

My conversation with former sewer Feng Zhao who worked in the 1980s and 1990s well illustrated how prolonged isolated work constrained workers' imagination:

Jing Jiang: Do you think working on a single task in the factory had impacts on your thinking? If so, how?

Feng Zhao: Of course. It is isolated. You can't get in touch with anything. You do this, only this. You have no contact with others. Factories are isolated. You get up in the morning, go to work, get off work, and get back. You work all day within the factory. You have tasks on hand. How could you have the energy to learn about other things? Yinwei (because, 因为) (you) don't have that energy. Your child is little. (You need to) send her to the kindergarten and pick her up. No one can help you. Because housing conditions are limited, you can't live together with the elderly (referring to the parents). It was not too bad for me. The elderly helped me raise my child to her seventh month. Our child went to kindergarten in her seventh month. Do you have the energy to do something else? No energy to do other things! And no energy to think about other things. Because you are constrained here.

Feng Zhao's quote first implied that her factory was a spatial trap, a metaphor I use to capture that factories were cut off from the outside world. She pointed out that factories were isolated and constrained her. Feng explained that social interaction in the factory was minimal as apparel workers could not get in touch with people and things outside the factory. Typically, factory doors were not open to outsiders. Regulars in the factory were production workers and managers. Production workers did not get in touch with people other than their co-workers in factories. At work, they also had to focus on their small task assigned to them. Feng was a sewer in an assembly-line-based factory where workers were only taught to complete one *gongxu* (a single task, 工序). Regular workers only knew one small task on the assembly line; only a couple of smart workers learned multiple skills sneakily. Confined workplace and still work determined that Feng did not have a chance to get in touch with new things and ideas that could inspire her imagination.

Feng also pointed out apparel work was temporally binding as she worked all day in the factory. Feng's time investment at work was shaped by her income structure, which combined a basic *gongzi* (salary, 工资) and earning by piece rate. Her factory set up a mandatory quota and offered a basic *gongzi* which was about 30 CNY per month. After reaching the quota, workers'



output was paid by the piece rate, and the compensation was called *jiangjin* (bonus, 奖金). A piece rate is the unit price paid to the worker for a given task. Workers' earning is calculated by timing the number of their outputs and the unit price. Feng could make about 70 CNY *jiangjin* each month. These figures showed that the major portion of Feng's monthly income was not from her basic *gongzi* earned by meeting the quota but from her *jiangjin*. Feng was incentivized to work longer to complete more tasks each day and earn more *jiangjin*. In the meantime, her factory also had enough orders for the production workers to work on. Feng also mentioned that childcare responsibilities consumed her energy after work, which I discuss more when addressing structural constraints. In short, despite her disgust with work, Feng was temporally bound to work due to the compensation system. The temporal bind worsened the spatial constraints on Feng as she devoted all disposable time to work rather than obtaining different spatial experiences and enjoying greater freedom to imagine.

The spatial strap and temporal bind converged to constrain Feng Zhao's imagination, as she stated that she had "no energy to do other things" and "no energy to think about other things." Feng's mind was focused on small tasks constantly. As a result, she barely took time off to imagine alternative modes of working and living, not to mention acting upon her imaginations.

The spatial-temporal configurations discussed above were applicable to other apparel factories at present to a large extent. Even though the work experience offered by Feng took place in assembly line-based factories two decades ago and the working conditions had improved in general, apparel manufacturing nowadays was still marked by extended work hours in confined space. For example, Long Han, a current sewer, often worked past midnight in her previous jobs. "It was normal to work till 3 a.m. You still had to start at 8 a.m. (The work was) very hard," said Long. Only getting 5-6-hour sleep was tough for Long in the old days. In her

current work, Long Han started work after 7 a.m. and got off after 9 p.m. Despite shortened work hours, Long still worked 12 hours each day. Based on my interview data, current production workers often started working at 8 o'clock or so in the morning and got off at 9 to 11 p.m on a typical workday. They only had a one-hour break for lunch and another for dinner. Almost no production workers had two days off on the weekend. Some worked the entire week and got a one-day vacation each month after receiving the paycheck. Most of them worked six days a week and got a one-day break on weekends.

As shown above, apparel workers recognized the negative impacts of factory work, and it is, therefore, important to explore how they were bound to the workplace. As mentioned earlier, the piece rate-based compensation system prompted apparel workers to extend their stay in the factory. In addition, participants revealed how the spatial strap and temporal bind of apparel factories were exaggerated by incentives, penalties, and co-worker communication.

### ***Incentives and rewards***

Production rewards strongly encouraged workers to increase productivity and work hours. Some factories offered monetary rewards to production workers who had the largest outputs. For example, one factory where Huhu Chu worked provided prizes each month to workers whose output ranked the top three in each *gongxu* (task, 工序). Huhu Chu ranked second and received the prize for several consecutive months. She said that she failed to be the top one because a broken needle hurt her eyes. After getting injured, Huhu Chu did not take sick leaves but returned to work after visiting a hospital. Huhu Chu's eager return to work with an eye injury showed the incentives for work were strong. The production prizes in Huhu Chu's factory were individual-based. Other participants also reported group-based rewards in their factories.

Attendance-based rewards and no paid sick leaves also disincentivized workers from taking days off at work. For example, Shushu Zheng's co-workers tried their best not to take sick leaves during menstrual cramps, as taking leaves would disqualify them for the reward for showing up to all shifts (*quanqin jiang*, 全勤奖). Even if without the reward, Feng Zhao and her co-workers continued work after receiving simple treatment when needles hurt their eyes because if they took leaves, they would not have been paid. Taken together, monetary rewards provided by factories incentivized production workers to extend their work hours, contributing to the temporal bind.

### ***Penalty, supervision, and skill***

Apparel factories also imposed penalties to ensure production workers' time investment and concentration, a phenomenon more common in older days. For example, Yue Zhou, who worked from 2002 to 2004, recalled, "The contract noted 5 yuan deduction if being late for 5 minutes, 10 yuan if 10 minutes, half-day absence if 30 minutes." Yue's factory had rigid regulations on punctuality and imposed a monetary penalty for tardiness. During work time, factories might also discipline production workers' conversations with co-workers. In her earlier employment, Long Han recalled, "He didn't allow you to talk when I worked in a big assembly line-based factory in Shanghai." Similarly, Zhong Qin, a former male apparel worker, reported tight supervision in earlier days when conversations were not allowed at work. Not allowing conversations worsened the spatial strap as production workers were further limited in their access to different ideas.

In other cases where conversations were allowed, workers might not be able to talk frequently. First, co-worker conversations were dependent on the temporal rhythm at work. Jinjin You recalled his work experience as a sewer, "Walking around, visiting other job positions, and

looking around were fine when you were not busy. It wasn't that serious. But when you *ganhuo* (rush an order, 赶货), you had no time to visit other positions." In Jinjin You's factory, workers could walk around when work was not busy; workers had no time to wander around when they were busy rushing an order. Their conversations with co-workers may be very brief as they needed to focus on their tasks at hand. Second, production workers might exercise self-discipline to limit conversations and maximize outputs. For example, Feng Zhao said that she was free to talk with her co-workers if she did not want to maximize her outputs. However, to earn a living, Feng had to work hard, concentrate, and limit conversations with her co-workers.

Intensive work also harmed apparel workers' acquisition of skill, further limiting their career choice. As aforementioned, some assembly-line-based factories did not give workers opportunities to learn other *gongxu* (task, 工序), such as in Feng Zhao's and Huhu Chu's cases. In whole-garment-making (*zhengjian*, 整件) factories, workers may not have opportunities to learn enough about other job positions, either. For example, Mang Xu, an ironer, disliked her job position and wanted to become a sewer. However, Mang Xu noted how the temporal rhythm at work limited her chance to learn a new skill:

Working in the factory at that time, everyone was busy. You might know simple tasks. As for more complex tasks, (people) needed time and energy to teach you. Others didn't have that much time to teach you. So, I haven't learned it.

The factory where Mang worked did not provide training opportunities. Her co-workers were also too engulfed by work to teach her more complex tasks. As a result, Mang Xu did not acquire sufficient skills in apparel making to switch her job position. Despite the desire to be a sewer, Mang's career aspiration was constrained by her limited skill sets, which could be partly accounted for by the work rhythm in apparel factories.

### *Co-worker homogenization*

The spatial-temporal constraints in factory work were worsened by the relatively low quality of co-worker communication in the workplace. As said, apparel workers' communication was mostly limited among co-workers. Many participants highlighted the limited education level of apparel workers and the attendant low quality of co-worker communication. Even though these accounts alluded to structural constraints that shaped apparel workers' education, I save such discussion later but focus on their self-appraisals here. In response to my question about whether her co-workers felt like relatives to each other, Long Han's comments reveal her evaluation of her colleagues:

I know you are that college student and alike. The higher diploma, the better *suzhi* (quality, 素质) and *suyang* (self-cultivation, 素养). Like your life circle will be better. Like our circle are ordinary *gongren* (production workers, 工人). *Xinli* (psychological, 心理) *suzhi* (quality, 素质) *suyang* (quality, 素养) is less high. Only these a couple of folks get long; those a couple get along. (It is) impossible that everyone is, like in a big family, everyone is so good.

According to Long, apparel workers had lower *suzhi* (quality, 素质) (e.g., manners, knowledge) and *suyang* (self-cultivation, 素养) than people with higher education. *Suyang* here has similar meanings with *suzhi* but emphasizes the cultivation process. Long associated one's *suzhi* with their level of formal education and regarded co-worker relationship as an indicator of one's *suzhi*. By highlighting my education level, Long implied the relatively low level of education of apparel workers. Long noted that apparel workers built small social circles instead of getting along very well with all workers, which she regarded as a manifestation of lower *suzhi*. Notably, small social circles in the factory were related to their work setup, which limited their communication among workers sitting close. Elsewhere in the interview, Long stated that co-

workers got along well with folks nearby. Yang Zhang, another sewer, further illustrated how co-workers' education affected apparel workers' imagination:

You always stay in a closed space and only get in touch with your co-workers (*tonghang*, 同行). People in our industry are *bijiao* (kind of, 比较) old, and their education level is not high. Then you stay with this group of people all the time, horizon (*yanjie*, 眼界), you know you become the kind of people you stay with, right? It's so in my opinion. Horizon (*yanjie*, 眼界) and *xinxiong* (heart and mind, 心胸) will become narrow.

Yang Zhang pointed out co-worker homogenization on the shopfloor, meaning co-workers became similar to each other as they stayed together for a prolonged time in a confined space. Moreover, Yang stated that only communicating with co-workers with limited education at work led to narrowing the heart and mind. In short, co-worker homogenization in the factory degraded apparel workers' capacity to imagine.

Taken together, production workers were subject to the piece rate-based compensation system, production rewards, attendance rewards, penalties for tardiness, tight supervision, and periodically heightened temporal demand. All these incentives and disciplines spatially and temporally bound apparel production workers to their isolated workplace. Work consumed their time and energy and estranged them from communicative activities to obtain new information and different ideas. In the meantime, co-worker communication in the factory homogenized and narrowed workers' perspectives. As a result, production workers might not imagine feasible alternative modes of working despite their desires for them, as demonstrated in earlier sections. Repetitive work in a confined space for an extended time gradually resulted in their constrained imagination. Next, I turn to the structural constraints that shaped apparel workers' desires and aspirations.

## Structural locks in China

Apparel workers' constrained imagination reflected their limited agency in various structural constraints in society. Structures refer to broader economic, political, and cultural conditions, including regional inequality, government policies, patriarchy and others. Earlier sections in this chapter noted that apparel workers did not imagine viable alternative careers. I analyzed how their imagination was limited by spatial-temporal configurations of factory work. However, I was not suggesting that a wide range of alternatives would have been opened up to them if they had not been subject to factory constraints. In other words, apparel workers' career opportunities were materially constrained by social structures in the Chinese context. Under this condition, apparel workers developed fewer desires and aspirations. Next, I turn to prominent structural conditions related to employment in China.

### *Formal employment and guanxi*

In earlier days, formal employment in state-owned or collective-owned enterprises was scarce and *guanxi*-based, which greatly constrained apparel workers' career aspirations. *Guanxi* refers to one's social networks, especially connections with authorities or other influential people. *Guanxi* was a form of social capital that people could rely on to obtain opportunities or resources. A significant source of *guanxi* came from one's *danwei* (work unit, 单位). Feng Zhao gave an account of how *guanxi* affected her employment in the 1980s:

During our 70s, 80s when I returned after *chadui* (urban educated residents working in the rural area, 插队), it was really hard to get into a factory. After we returned, the state (*guojia*, 国家) did not manage (job) assignment, did not manage job search<sup>16</sup>. You figured it out yourself. Your parents and *danwei* (*work unit*, 单位) figured it out. Only if your parents were doctors, teachers or soldiers as such, the state would find a job for you. The state didn't help the rest.

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<sup>16</sup> In earlier days, the state assigned jobs to college graduates.

As Feng stated, only the offspring of teachers, doctors, and government officials were guaranteed jobs by the state. To get a good job, one needed a strong family background and personal connections (*guanxi*). Feng's parents had some but not strong *guanxi*. Feng got her initial jobs through her parents' work unit and ended up in an apparel factory by accident. Feng was arranged to work in the collectively owned apparel factory when the clothing store she worked for was requisitioned. Obtaining stable employment in a factory was considered a privilege during that time as job opportunities were so scarce. However, Feng disliked her work a lot due to the spatial-temporal configurations of factory work, as demonstrated by her quotes listed above. Feng further explained her constrained career choice:

Ah! I wanted to switch, but without *guanxi*, you couldn't move at all. You wanted to get into another industry. You did not have *guanxi*. At that time, all was on people, on *guanxi*. My family were ordinary folks (*pingtoubaixing*, 平头百姓). We did not have that, which was called, *ziyuan* (resources, 资源). Without *guanxi*, I couldn't leave at all. I could go nowhere. I had to stay in that shitty (*po*, 破) factory.

Feng was emphasizing that she lacked *guanxi* to pursue a different career. She could not switch jobs and felt that she was stuck at the factory. Even though Feng disliked her job, limited employment opportunities constrained her imagination of alternative careers, as shown in an earlier quote that she did not have any idea about what she desired to do. Elsewhere in the interview, Feng Zhao praised that young generations like me had more ideas while lamenting the lack of ideas among her generation in the old days. Feng's comparison highlighted that people's imagination was much constrained in an era when opportunities were scarce and tied to *guanxi*. As Feng's experience exemplified employment constraints on urban residents, I build on her struggle to address additional limits on migrant workers.



### ***Rural/urban divide and migration***

Regional disparities between rural and urban areas significantly shaped migrant apparel workers' career choices. Many participants working in apparel factories were migrants from poorer inland villages where land yield was not sufficient, and employment opportunities were scarce. As Chapter Three notes, China's economic reform began along the coastal areas. Many workers left their home villages to seek employment in coastal regions. These workers included single and married folks who shouldered financial responsibilities for their families. Yue Zhou was an example of migrant workers who sought employment to support their children. Yue Zhou recalled her departure from home in 2002:

At that time, I was two kids' mother. To make a living, I left two kids with their grandparents. I made the hard decision (*henxin*, 狠心) to *dagong* (work for a boss, 打工) in another province. I left Hunan Province for Zhenhai District in Ningbo City, Zhejiang Province.

Yue Zhou left Hunan, an inland province, for Zhejiang, a coastal one. This decision was very hard for her as she had to leave her two children behind. Before she left Hunan, her husband had been working in Zhejiang. They sought employment there as earning in their home province was not enough to raise their children.

Some migrant workers left home at a younger age to support themselves and their families in poverty. In the early days, many households in rural villages had multiple children and were poor. Parents could not afford all children's tuitions and let the elder children or children with lower grades quit school. Those withdrawn from school had to find jobs to support themselves and, if possible, send remittances home to support their parents and siblings who continued school. Shushu Zheng's life experience provided an example.

Shushu Zheng was born in 1975 in a rural village. She is the second kid among the nine children in her family. The first four children, all females, left the village and became migrant

workers to support their parents and younger siblings in school. In 1993 when Shushu was eighteen years old, she went to a factory in the city with her elder sister. Her sister worked 16 hours a day in the factory, and Shushu Zheng worked 12 hours a day. They chose to starve in the morning to save 0.5 CNY on breakfast. They only spent 20-50 CNY a month on themselves and remitted 1000-15000 CNY to their parents. Shushu recalled her living conditions in the 1990s: “No boiled water. (We) drank off the tap. Sometimes no tap water for two or three days. You drank water from the well. That was the case. You had no choices. You had to survive.” Shushu Zheng’s example showed poverty and family responsibilities compelled migrant workers to extend work time, increase outputs, and maximize incomes.

### ***The constraint on imagination***

The rural/urban divide and migrant status were consequential in constraining apparel workers’ imagination. In Shushu Zheng’s case, growing up in poverty and participating in employment earlier had long-lasting impacts on her imagination. She further commented on her constrained desires:

The epoch (*shidai*, 时代) changes rapidly. Changes started from 1997 when Hong Kong returned to its homeland when I was married. But our education level is low. We can’t keep up. Many people *xiahai jingshang* (run businesses, 下海经商)<sup>17</sup>. Many people took exams to go to college. Many people realized their dreams. But we are in the village after all; we can’t realize it. This is a fact.

Shushu Zheng lamented how her limited education level constrained her potential to achieve her career dreams. Shushu quit school after only one and a half year of education in elementary school. After working for a year, Shushu Zheng returned to school but found she could no longer keep up with the class. So, she withdrew from school permanently. At the age of thirteen, Shushu

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<sup>17</sup> Xiahai means giving up a permanent position in state enterprises and seeking employment in private enterprises.

assumed a dishwasher job in the town center and worked there for five years until she joined her sister for factory work. Upon marriage in the late 1990s, Shushu Zheng saw many people succeed in business or go to college and felt left behind China's economic development. As mentioned elsewhere in the interview, Shushu quit factory work and returned to the village after marriage and engaged in different businesses, the type of work she desired. However, Shushu Zheng still thought that she could not achieve her dream or full potential due to her life in the village and limited education. Shushu Zheng's example again demonstrates that rather than not having desires, migrant workers felt their desires were constrained by their rural background, which meant a relatively low level of socio-economic status and education in China.

Not only frontline workers but also factory owners shared the feeling that their imagination was constrained by their social background. Tutu Hua was one of many migrant entrepreneurs who came from inland provinces and ran businesses in coastal areas. Tutu Hua once owned an apparel factory described his decreasing desires:

I don't aspire to a way of life, endeavor, or try to make a certain amount of money to live a particular way of life. I thought so before. In the past, I wanted to make more money soon to drive a luxury car and live in a luxury house. Later I gave up (*suanle*, 算了). Of course, he (I) can't stand it. Isn't it just a normal (*zhengchang*, 正常) life? It'll be okay if I can guarantee my normal living standard. *Yinwei* we have been endeavoring outside for over ten years. Relatively speaking, we are *bijiao* (kind of, 比较) stable. With a car, house, and kids. In my remaining time, my thinking is to make money to maintain it and save a bit money for emergency. You say thinking hard to make big money and run a big factory, no. I feel it is too hard. Too hard. In China, I feel, *guanxi* is essential. Too *renqingshigu* (wordly, sophisticated, 人情世故). This is very important. Like we, these folks, without large *guanxi* networks, are hard to make outstanding achievements (*zuode chuse*, 做得出色).

After endeavoring for more than a decade, Tutu Hua gave up his initial desire to make a large sum of money and living a luxurious life. His term "outside" highlights his migrant status in the place where he ran business. Even after ten years, the workplace was still considered external to

him; he also regarded himself as an outsider there. Coming from an inland area, Tutu Hua felt that he lacked strong *guanxi* to expand his business and outstand others. As Tutu Hua has secured a middle-class life for his family, he accepted the status quo and gave up his initial dream. Tutu Hua saw the ceiling of his career development and thus lowered his expectations. In other words, his example showed how limited *guanxi* constrained migrant entrepreneurs' business aspirations and desires for a way of life.

### *Gendered parental care*

The examples above mainly reflected the experiences of migrant workers who worked long hours for financial reasons. A different group of local or migrant workers chose apparel manufacturing in that it provided greater flexibility for childcare. This situation was mostly reported by female workers. For example, Mang Xu, born in 1987, who was taking care of her young son, explained her rationale for choosing apparel work:

Where I stayed, if you wanted to enter a factory, I mean a more formal factory, it had requirements on time and all aspects. So, if I want to take care of my child, I can't enter that kind of factory you (I) want. So, I could only choose apparel making, because at present only apparel (industry) is the freest.

Mang Xu pointed out that factories in other industries were more rigid in time management than apparel factories. Here, the apparel factories Mang Xu referred to were small cut and sew facilities in which sewers made whole garments instead of working on assembly lines. Sewers making whole garments had greater flexibility than assembly-line workers. Mang Xu was an ironer and planned to become a sewer to make whole garments. While Mang Xu disliked the apparel industry, she nonetheless chose to stay within this industry. The flexible schedule in apparel factories would allow Mang Xu to take leaves to look after her son in case of emergency. Mang Xu's situation was similar to those working in the factories owned by Lulu Sun and invested by Zhuzhu Qi, respectively. These factories employed local workers who often assumed

childcare and needed flexible work schedules. These examples illustrated that in the context of limited employment opportunities, childcare bound female apparel workers to their work despite their discontents. Gendered parental care further limited female apparel workers' imagination of a different career.

Overall, this major section illustrates two key constraints shaping apparel workers' imagination: spatial-temporal configurations in factories and structural conditions in the Chinese context. Apparel factories were marked by spatial traps and temporal binds, which limited apparel workers' opportunities to obtain new ideas and skills and constrained their imagination. Material constraints in factories were exaggerated by structural conditions, such as guanxi-based employment, rural-urban disparity, and gendered parental care. These structural limits narrowed apparel workers' career choices and aspirations. Even though the examples and my analysis above presented a negative image of apparel work and a gloomy future of apparel workers, my interviews also generated positive accounts that provided a beam of hope.

### **Microemancipations and lessened constraints**

Participants offered accounts about how their imagination was improved under certain conditions, a process I regard as microemancipation. It was micro because this change might be minor, gradual, and temporary. Nevertheless, pushing the limit of imagination was emancipatory for the participants. As Chapter Four has addressed, incorporating victory stories and attending to hope are necessary to the presentation of research findings. As such, addressing microemancipations is important here. They provide positive stories and might bring hope to participants and workers alike amidst pessimistic portrayals of work. Also, microemancipations help illuminate the social formation of constrained imagination, helping prevent it from being read as individual psychological pathology. In particular, catalyzing changes reported by

participants included obtaining managerial positions in the factory or undertaking different jobs in non-factory settings. Some apparel workers placed their hope on their younger siblings or offspring. My research was also seen as a possible way to help them lift various constraints. While not disappearing, lessened constraints helped participants obtain new perspectives and expand their imagination. When illustrating different ways to experience microemancipations next, I also attend to structural and opportunistic factors leading to such changes.

### **Moving up: managerial positions**

For some frontline production workers, moving up to managerial positions in the factory ameliorated the spatial-temporal constraints they had experienced. It is exactly due to this difference between managerial and frontline production positions that I primarily drew on frontline production workers' narratives when illuminating constrained imagination. Yinyin Tao, a former sewer and current director of back processes illuminated the differences between his two job positions:

Of course, there are differences. At least, (my) personal ability has improved, right? In addition, I can get in touch with some new things, such as communicating with customers, or knowledge about the apparel industry. Generally speaking, definitely, as we say, maybe our *jianshi* (knowledge, horizon, 见识) is definitely broader; people who we connect with (*jiejiao*, 结交) are different. Both are better. (It's) because when being a sewer, we were only in the frontline (*zaiyixian*, 在一线) and only got in touch with surrounding people...Like now, we sometimes communicate with customers; we follow up with these orders. So, we get in touch with more things outside.

Yinyin Tao's quote suggests that the spatial constraint was lifted after he became a director. He had more opportunities to communicate with different people outside of the factory and obtain more knowledge about the industry. As a result, he felt broadened horizon and expanded imagination. Echoing Yinyin, Shui Cao also recognized the impacts of different job positions on

his viewpoint. Shui had been a sewer and director in the department of quality control. Currently, he was a *changzhang* (top manager, 厂长) in the factory. He noted,

The platform has some changes and has impacts. Maybe when you are a *yuangong* (employee, 员工), you may only think about yourself. But when you are a manager, you need to think holistically, thinking of all people. You need to think about all matters from the perspective of all people, rather than thinking about problems only from your own perspective. This is the biggest change in my perspective. Maybe when you are a sewer, you only think about what a sewer should do. When you are making apparel, you think about how I can do this well. You are not thinking about how to help others do their job well. Maybe when you are a *zhuguan* (director, 主管), you say that I want people under my supervision, such as 10 groups or 20 groups, to do better. Maybe when you are *changzhang* (top manager, 厂长), you may say how I can help the boss to make profits as much as possible. Every time you stand at a level, you have different perspectives, (or) changes in your *sixiang* (thinking, 思想).

Shui Cao highlighted the impact of platforms, i.e., job positions, on one's perspectives. As he moved up to managerial positions, he learned to take the perspectives of others and adopt a more holistic approach. Also, Shui revealed the top manager's focus on helping the owner make greater profits rather than raising incomes for production workers. Shui's reflection implied the higher position one occupied in the managerial hierarchy, the broader horizon one had. I followed by asking, "What opportunity do you think facilitated this change? Was it your position?" Shui Cao responded:

It also has something to do with yourself. For example, if you have *shangjin xin* (aspirations, 上进心), you will think about how I can do it better. It is not all about position. It may have something to do with position to a certain degree. Because when you stand in a position, you must face these problems and deal with these problems. For example, if you don't change your perspective, how can you get into this position.

Shui's reply drew attention to the imbrication of one's aspiration and higher job position. According to him, with career aspirations, one would improve their work and change their perspective, which further facilitated their career development; career advancements brought

new challenges and broader perspectives. Shui Cao's comments illuminate a more general implication of my finding of constrained imagination. That is, one's imagination and perspectives are shaped by the material landscape of one's work.

A closer reading of Shui's narrative and other interviews surfaced his bias and a gendered pathway for career development. Admittedly, career advancements were partly accounted for by individual aspirations. However, the mere individual difference was not the whole picture. Even though apparel workers were predominantly females, my interview data only identified male participants who moved up to top managerial positions from frontline production workers, such as Shui Cao, Yinyin Tao, and Lanlan Wei. Female frontline production workers only reported moving up to line leaders. Their career ceiling was partly due to their withdrawal from factory work for marriage, childcare, and other reasons and partly due to various limits on female entrepreneurship. Factory owner Juju He noted that as a female entrepreneur, she found herself subject to many inconveniences in male-dominated business circles.

In short, Yinyin Tao's and Shui Cao's experiences illuminate how moving up to managerial positions helped to liberate their mind and thus expanding their imagination. My critical interrogation further suggests a gendered effect of this microemancipation, as male workers often enjoyed greater career advancements in factories than their female counterparts.

### **Moving out: non-factory settings**

As the spatial-temporal constraint was prominent in factory settings, former apparel workers reported lessened constraints on their imagination after assuming other occupations outside of the manufacturing industry. For example, Feng Zhao, who worked as a bus ticket seller after her factory was requisitioned, noted the improved spatial-temporal configurations in her new job:



Like in stores, you get in touch with more people. Like later on, (when) I was on the bus, selling tickets on the bus, I got in touch with more people. The *xinxi liang* (amount of information, 信息量) was relatively larger. Things I knew were *bijiao* (relatively, 比较) a bit more. It was different when I worked in factory. In the factory, you worked in that area and you could not hear others. Right? I think for ticket sellers, who, of course, do not exist now, *xinxi liang* was larger and people they got in touch were (more). The more people one got in touch with, the larger *xinxi liang*. *Yinwei* (because, 因为) those days were not like now. Current *xinxi liang*, due to internet and stuff alike, is *bijiao* large. In those days, what existed? It was already good enough to have a TV at home.

Unlike the factory, the bus is a mobile, open space where different people meet, allowing greater information flow. When working as a bus ticket seller, Feng met with more people and obtained more ideas than she did in the factory. Face-to-face interaction was important for information exchange during that time when communication media, such as TV, computers, and cellphones, was not widely adopted. These media allowed people to access more information beyond their immediate physical environment. I followed up by asking Feng whether information flow affected people's thinking. She responded, "Yes. (We) did not have any ideas. (Life was) just going to work, getting off work, and taking care of the child." Feng affirmed the impact of information flow shaped by the spatial-temporal configurations at work on people's capacity to imagine. Feng Zhao's narrative explicitly reveals that in contrast to repetitive factory work for extended hours that constrained her imagination, a new occupation in a non-factory setting brought her microemancipation.

Experiences in non-factory settings might also affect participants' imagination in more covert forms. Some participants reported new appraisals of their factory work experience after quitting factory work. For example, Mumu Shi thought more about capital-labor relations when he was no longer a sewer. His response emerged in our conversation about supporting apparel workers' demand for better working conditions and compensation:

Jing Jiang: If they (apparel workers in other countries) seek your help, such as asking for a signature or demonstration, how will you respond?

Mumu Shi: If it is reasonable, I can support them. It's because this matter. You also know that capital-labor relation is hard to balance. Do you know? (It's) because *yuangong* (employees, 员工) want to make more but the boss also wants to make more. No one is wrong if you take both perspectives. Yes or no? There is *pingheng dian* (a balance point, 平衡点). It's a matter of *pingheng dian*. That's the case.

Jing Jiang: Do you think the capital-labor relation reached a balance or the distribution (of profits) was fair when you worked (as a sewer)?

Mumu Shi: I feel *yinwei* (because, 因为) I did not think about these problems that time. I feel we all wanted to have higher *gongzi* (income, 工资). Actually afterward, thinking about it now, (I) feel actually it was a kind of exploitation (*yazha*, 压榨) in that time. (*Gongzi* was) too low.

Mumu Shi noted that he had gained more profound insight into the exploitative working conditions in his factory employment at the time of the interview, which he did not reflect on while working there. After quitting factory work, Mumu Shi returned to his home province to help his relative run an online business, which paid better and was much less physically demanding. In retrospect, Mumu realized that his low income in the factory reflected exploitation, which meant owners enjoyed disproportionately greater profits than employees in unbalanced capital-labor relations. Mumu Shi did not contemplate this power imbalance at the time of work even though he and his co-workers were dissatisfied with low income. Mumu Shi's renewed understanding of the tension between capital and labor implied that one might gain microemancipations after exiting the factory environment, which constrained their imagination.

Admittedly, the acquired new perspectives might also be accounted for by increasing ages and experiences. For example, at the time of the interview, former sewer Jinjin You had left the apparel factory for more than ten years. During our conversation, he brought up hardship in his factory work between 1996 and 2009. Then I inquired him about happy workers and gained insight into how he reassessed his factory experience at an older age:

Jing Jiang: Have you heard about other people living a happy life in apparel factories?

Jinjin You: Happy days also existed. Like (*xiang*, 像) the old days we had were quite happy. Despite living without money, we indeed lived a quite happy life. We were worry-free then without much pressure. Yes or no?

Jing Jiang: So, you mean both aspects existed, right? As for yourself, you felt happy, worry-free, and kind of *xinku* (tired, 辛苦).

Jinjin You: Correct. Both aspects existed.

Jing Jiang: But after getting older, you look back and feel more *xinsuan* (hardship, 辛酸).

Jinjin You: Correct.

Jinjin You acknowledged his happiness when working in the apparel factory at a young age but viewed his work experience more negatively in retrospect. His pleasure at work was related to his young age when he did not have much financial burden or family responsibilities. Despite their low income and long work hours at that time, Jinjin and his co-workers enjoyed socialization and leisure activities outside of work. However, looking back, Jinjin recalled more hardship than happiness in his factory employment. Jinjin You's example illustrates how the pleasure of informal socialization helped workers sustain themselves in dehumanizing factory work (Roy, 1959). More importantly, Jinjin You's retrospective sensemaking illuminates how aging and the exit from factory work made him more aware of various constraints in factory work.

Increased awareness of these constraints was liberating as it facilitated participants' articulations of their desires and demands. In Mumu Shi's case, his understanding of his compensation in factory work moved from a low income to an unfair income, which could potentially transform the vague desire for better income to an actionable demand for better pay. As for Jinjin You, with stronger recognition of factory work's hardship, Jinjin You expressed that he would strongly support factory workers if they demanded better working conditions and compensation. In short, participants had recognized the spatial-temporal constraints of factory

work during their tenure, and their awareness of such constraints was heightened after they exited the factory setting. Assuming new occupations, aging, and gaining richer life experiences altogether offered them new perspectives and broadened their horizon and imagination.

### **Moving forward: generational mobility**

In contrast to the above two sections focusing on participants' own expanded imagination, this section discusses a third way of experiencing microemancipation through others—placing hope on younger generations' social mobility. In the former sections, I addressed how participants were constrained by the need to provide financial support for their younger siblings and children. Some research reported migrant workers' resentment of their sacrifice for their families (e.g., Ban, 2012). However, participants in this study showed delight in their contribution to the family, especially when witnessing the younger generations' success. For example, Shushu Zheng felt not able to achieve her dream due to her limited education. She withdrew from school early to work and financially support her younger siblings. Even though Shushu's education was terminated for her siblings, she said that she had no regret. Instead, Shushu was happy to see them go to college and live a good life.

Similar to Shushu Zheng, Feng Zhao also valued formal education for the younger generation's class mobility. Feng commented on her plan to move her daughter into a different career through education:

At that time, I felt that I needed to cultivate (*peiyang*, 培养) a college graduate. I must spare my child from working and suffering (*ganhuo*, *shoule*, 干活受累) like me. Then wasn't there a saying by Confucius? "Those who do mental labor rule and those who do manual labor are ruled." (*laoxinzhe zhiren*, *laolizhe zhiyuren*, 劳心者治人, 劳力者治于人).

Even though Feng Zhao perceived no career choice for herself as aforementioned, she desired a different career for her daughter. Knowing the hardship of factory work, Feng Zhao was

determined to send her daughter into college so that her daughter would not need to continue factory work. Feng cited Confucius' saying about the contrast between mental and manual work. Feng regarded her assembly work as manual work without skill, pleasure, or a sense of achievement, so she wanted her daughter to receive better education and undertake a different career. I followed up by asking whether Feng was satisfied with the outcome of her endeavor to educate her daughter. Feng responded:

Ah hah, I feel quite satisfied. Me, a product of the Cultural Revolution. (I) started school when the Cultural Revolution began. The ten years were tumultuous. The decade of the Cultural Revolution. I could be said as illiterate (*mei wenhua*, 没文化). Then though (I was a) high school graduate, *guojia* (state, 国家) did not accredit (*chengren*, 承认) this diploma. I, an illiterate (person), could cultivate a college graduate. I feel I am quite good (*tingbang*, 挺棒). I feel quite pleased (*tingmei*, 挺美).

Feng expressed satisfaction and pleasure in sending her daughter to college. Feng received little education as she grew up during China's Cultural Revolution, a decade in which formal education was overridden by agricultural work in rural areas. Viewing herself as illiterate, Feng was very proud of herself in that she cultivated a college graduate. Feng perceived obtaining higher education as an honor and a way for upward class mobility. After graduation, Feng's daughter engaged in business management, human resource management, or things alike, which Feng did not know exactly. Feng said her daughter's income was not very high. However, Feng was reassured that the pay was enough for her daughter to raise a child. Feng's narratives show that she felt microemancipations in witnessing her daughter's success in receiving higher education and escaping factory work.

When endeavoring for their offspring's education, participants, especially migrant workers had to negotiate continuous structural limits, especially the *hukou* policy (M. Yu & Crowley, 2020). *Hukou*, household or residency registration, limited migrant workers' capacity to

obtain healthcare, houses, pension, and offspring education. In recent years, many cities have started to allow the offspring of migrant workers to attend public schools after workers pay social securities for certain years. For example, after Long Han worked in a city for many years, Long Han's son was able to attend a boarding school there.

However, the loosened *hukou* policy continued to constrain migrant workers. Long Han was confident that she could get higher pay by working in more developed cities, such as Shanghai. However, Long Han chose to stay because her son would not be able to attend a school if she relocated. To ensure the continuity of her son's education, Long Han refrained from relocating to higher incomes areas. Long Han would consider relocating after her son went to college. Moreover, Long Han worked overtime willingly to save up money for her son. She thought about only working eight hours a day after her son grew up and she got older. Long Han's story illustrates that within the structural constraint, placing hope on the younger generation was a double-edged sword, which increased the offspring's mobility while limiting the participant's mobility. Altogether, the cases of Shushu Zheng, Feng Zhao, and Long Han demonstrate despite their hardship, participants experienced microemancipations through the younger generations' social mobility, which manifested in obtaining more formal education, especially higher education and assuming a career outside of manufacturing.

### **Talking loud: research advocacy**

The last way for participants to experience microemancipations I identified is research advocacy, including the research process and research outcomes. As my interview protocol included hypothetical questions, I prompted participants to ponder issues that they had not reflected on, as illustrated by my conversation with Mang Xu:

Jing Jiang: If you want to improve your working *huanjing* (conditions, 环境) and *daiyu* (compensation and benefits, 待遇), who do you think you need to trust, rely on and build alliances with?

Mang Xu: I feel that I actually have not thought about this question. However, since you asked this question, I suddenly thought of an idea. For example, you interview me now, maybe you will write a paper and publish it. I feel, I feel your way, I feel possibly, seems to be helping us. I feel in the apparel industry, at least for us *gongren* (production workers, 工人), *gongzi* (income, 工资) and *daiyu* (compensation and benefits, 待遇) are not good, or high. Regarding specifically who can help me, or who I can go and ask for help, I have not thought about this question. Maybe I won't do this in the real life. But you asked me; I feel now you can help me. There can be improvements then. That is, if your contents get published and have great influence in the future, they may help improve factories. I personally think so.

Mang Xu's response illustrates the twofold impacts of my research. First, my interview questions provoked Mang Xu's imagination about ways to improve her working conditions and compensation and people to build alliances with, both of which she had not considered before. Second, as speculated by Mang Xu, presenting my research findings had the potential to generate greater public attention to poor factory conditions and thus bring positive transformations.

Mang Xu's comment shows that the research process could itself be an intervention, leading to an emancipatory moment for participants. Mang Xu's experience of microemancipation during the interview affirms my rationale for choosing interviews over ethnographies stated in Chapter Four. Interviews allowed me to ask hypothetical questions and generate unique insight that was unavailable to naturalist observation in factory ethnographies. To use hypothetical questions and adopt an interventionalist approach, I also negotiated with institutional gatekeepers during my IRB application. The IRB reviewer suggested I take out of some hypothetical questions which they read as politically orienting. However, I persuaded them to allow me to keep these questions by defending their value in bringing novel data (S. J. Tracy, 2013).

The hope Mang placed on the influence of my research findings pleased and humbled me. First, I worried about perpetuating the stigma of factory work by telling participants' sorrow and pains, as said in Chapter Four. Mang reassured me by implying the importance of having their voice heard and bringing attention to the dark side of factory work. Second, I recognize both the potential influence of research and its limits. Even though I had a modest ambition to help improve their working conditions to some degree, there is no guarantee on my research's practical impacts. As such, I view Mang's hope as my encouragement to present my findings in all capacity.

Participants' hope for my research might also be implicit in their act of participating in the interviews. A case in my recruitment process also illustrates the perceived benefits of my research. Upon seeing my recruitment process, a stranger who had not worked in the apparel industry reached out to me, expressing his gratitude to me and describing his plan to disseminate my recruitment notice. As the apparel workers surrounding him suffered from work, he had been wanting to conduct a similar study to reveal their working conditions. Since he had not been able to do so, he was thankful that I was conducting this research. Echoing Mang Xu, the stranger rested faith in the influence of my research to tell apparel workers' stories and shed light on their working conditions. Although the impacts of my research findings have not come into effect, these examples demonstrate the potential of research advocacy to bring microemancipations for apparel workers.

Altogether, this section discusses four major pathways whereby participants felt microemancipations. These liberational moments took place when they expanded imagination in managerial positions or non-factory settings or when they witnessed or aspired to the younger generation's educational attainment and class mobility. Conversing with me and pondering my



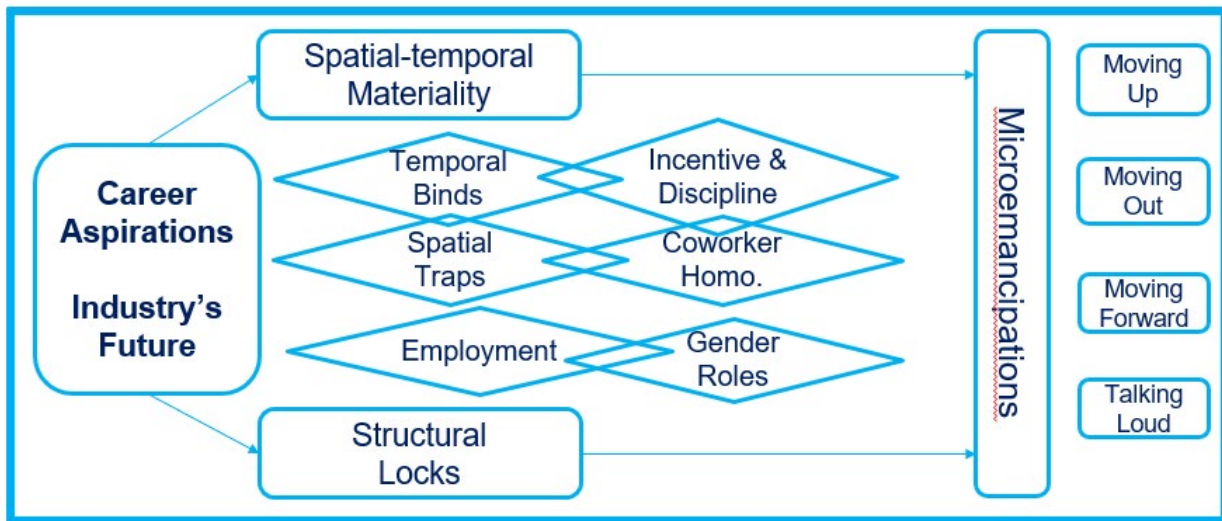
hypothetical questions also helped some participants recognize the blind spots of their thinking and thus generate new perspectives. Furthermore, the public presentation of my research findings was also viewed by some participants and concerned parties as a catalyst for change.

**Conclusion: Explicating constrained imagination**

This chapter (see Figure 8) builds around the key theme “constrained imagination,” which describes the phenomenon of one’s future-oriented desires being limited by organizational and social constraints. Constrained imagination emerged as a central work identity for apparel workers, especially production workers. Participants revealed their constrained career aspirations and constrained ideas about the possibilities of industrial transformation. I further analyzed how

**Figure 8**

Illustration of Constrained Imagination



spatial-temporal features of factory work and structural conditions in the Chinese context shaped workers’ constrained imagination. Despite overall pessimism, participants also provided stories about ways in which they felt the constraints lessened up and their imagination expanded, which I called “microemancipations.” Next, I explicate what “constrained imagination” means, how it

comes into existence, in what ways it matters, and how it can be transformed. I bridge my discussions with key insights developed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

### **Three meanings of “constrained imagination”**

“Constrained imagination” first acknowledges participants’ capacity for imagination. “Constrained imagination” does not mean “lacking imagination” or “no imagination.” Participants in this study indeed developed desires for different careers and better working conditions. For example, Feng Zhao said, “I could go nowhere. I had to stay in that shitty (*po*, 破) factory.” The term “shitty” expresses Feng’s disgust in her work, implying her desire for a better workplace. In another example, Quan Kong stated, “Who doesn’t hope for change? I also want to make money. I also want to be rich.” This account more explicitly reveals Quan’s desire for more income and improved living. Moreover, various stories about microemancipations also affirm participants’ capacity to develop or cultivate imagination, which I illustrate more shortly.

I purposefully chose the term “constrained”<sup>18</sup> instead of “impoverished,” “deprived,” or “deficient” to acknowledge participants’ existing desires and their capacity to imagine. Highlighting participants’ capacity for imagination is important to preempt a pathological reading of their lived experience. In other words, constrained imagination should not be read as participants’ lacking motivations. It is not a problem of the individual psychiatric or psychological deficit. Nor is it cultural inertia among the participants and the broader migrant worker communities.

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<sup>18</sup> I thank Sarah Dempsey for bringing up this term when we were brainstorming an appropriate term to capture my finding. I first mentioned “limited constrained” but was not satisfied with this term. Then Sarah spoke out “constrained imagination,” a term I liked right away. I prefer “constrained” because it better captures the active process of shaping. While the verbs “limit” and “constrain” are synonyms, the adjectives “constrained” and “limited” have different connotations. “Limited” often describes a still, stable status, such as in the term “limited responsibilities,” rather than emphasizing the dynamic process of “limiting.”

Second, “constrained imagination” draws attention to the social formation of imagination. While everyone has the capacity to imagine, to extend to which people realize their capacity is shaped by the particular context in which they are situated. The opening quote by Yang Zhang in this chapter well illustrates the social shaping of imagination: “if you stay in a factory too long, your *xinxiong* will both become narrow.” The term “become” highlights the processual nature of workers’ imagination. That is, their imagination is not static but changes over the course of working in the factory setting. Yang Zhang’s quote echoes with the following quote in Chapter Two: “Crucially, the imagination in this context is not a straightforward faculty of the individual, but is (also or even primarily) a social faculty” (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, p. 325). Both quotes illustrate that while workers have the capacity to imagine, their imagination is mediated or influenced by social environments.

In particular, “constrained imagination” focuses on the limiting of imagination by their environments. As Yang Zhang’s quote mentioned, apparel workers’ heart and mind became “narrow” rather than “wide” or “broad” at work. Their narrowed imagination is further explicated in the examples of their career aspirations. While participants developed desires for alternative careers, these desires were often vague or felt unachievable to them. As aforementioned, Feng desired a different workplace, but she was not able to identify an alternative job opportunity. Similarly, Mumu Shi and Jin Jin You both felt no feasible alternative careers were available to them. For all three of them, their limited desires were partly due to the lack of adequate social conditions or resources to realize their desires. These examples demonstrate that participants’ imagination was limited or constrained.

Third, participants articulated “constrained imagination” as a salient work identity. Participants recognized that social contexts were limiting their imagination, as evidenced by the

above Yang Zhang's quote. They lived with a heightened awareness of their constrained imagination. For example, Shushu Zheng felt that she could not keep up with the social pace and impossible to realize her dream. Similarly, Tutu Hua felt too difficult to achieve his dream of conducting large businesses and living a luxurious life. Altogether, participants were conscious of the process in which their imagination was narrowing down and the fact that their capacity to realize their dream was limited.

Moreover, participants clearly narrated the identity of "constrained imagination," which distinguishes "constrained imagination" from "bounded imagination." As developed in Chapter Two, bounded imagination broadly captures one's future-oriented desires being limited by organizational and social constraints. As such, "constrained imagination" is a manifestation of "bounded imagination." "Constrained imagination" is also different from "bounded imagination" as "constrained imagination" emphasizes participants' awareness of the limiting of their imagination and their ability to articulate it. Participants did not use the term "constrained imagination." Nevertheless, their poignant self-narratives helped me develop this term.

Participants' articulation, or linguistic enunciation, differentiates "constrained imagination" from insight into worker agency documented from factory ethnographies. As discussed in Chapter Two, factory ethnographies have attended to how workers' bodily reactions evidenced the impacts of power and control on their subjective realms. For example, in her (2005) study of Chinese factory workers, Pun (2005) draws attention to workers' nightmares and a particularly striking example of a dream-induced scream. Pun (2005) argues that the subconscious realm provides a glimpse into workers' deep discontent with social and organizational disciplinary powers. Pun regarded their nonarticulated bodily reaction as a form of authentic resistance, or "a minor genre of resistance." Similarly, under Ong's (1987) study of

Malaysian factory workers, the workers' hysterical bodily behaviors evoked discussions of ill spirits in the factory. These examples drew attention to the distortion or alienation of capitalist disciplines at the site of workers' subjective realms, which led to their uncontrollable behaviors. While these workers did not expressly articulate the problems they faced, their abnormal bodily reactions manifested the harm of factory work. By contrast, my participants pointed out how the apparel factory and the broader social conditions actively limited their imaginations. Participants' accounts provide counter-narratives to overly optimistic framings that regarded urban work experience as mind liberation for migrant workers (e.g., Yan, 2008). My research demonstrates that despite urban employment, migrant workers face constraints in the realm of their imaginations. Next, I turn to key constraints shaping workers' imagination.

### **Spatial-temporal materiality as constraints**

A major constraint on workers' imagination relates to spatial-temporal materiality at work. Spatially, workers lacked interaction with co-workers and outsiders in isolated factory spaces. Temporally, workers had little disposable time due to overtime work and the compensation system based on low piece rates. Monetary incentives, penalties, tight supervision, and periodically intensified work demands added to the spatial-temporal constraints. Also, limited co-worker communication tended to homogenize each other instead of broadening their imaginations. The spatial trap and temporal bind altogether bound apparel production workers to their workplace, consumed their energy, and estranged them from communicative activities. Limited communication prevented them from obtaining new information and different ideas, which, as a result, constrained their imagination of feasible alternative modes of work.

My findings of spatial-temporal materiality offer important lessons on the constitution of materiality and its role in organizing. Materiality has long been recognized as a key concept in

organizational communication scholarship (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Yet, there is no consensus on what materiality entails and how it works (e.g., Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019; Meisenbach, 2008; Novak, 2016). A number of studies have recognized space as a critical component of materiality (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cruz, 2015; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Novak, 2016; Rich, 2016). Limited studies have addressed the role of time in shaping organizational reality and work identities (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Kuhn, 2006). Few studies, with exceptions (e.g., Halford & Leonard, 2006), have attended to the simultaneous function of space and time. Some studies on materiality do not evoke the concept of space or time (e.g., Gist-Mackey & Dougherty, 2020; Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019). In short, organizational communication scholars have noted the importance of space or time as materiality, but this recognition is not consistent or comprehensive. My study contributes to the conception of materiality by demonstrating both space and time as significant components of materiality. Next, I further address the role of spatial-temporal materiality in organizing.

Key to the function of spatial-temporal materiality is its communicative affordances, that is, the extent to which the spatial-temporal configurations at work allow for communicative activities. Participants highlighted that the spatial trap and temporal bind at work limited their opportunities for communication. Their communication was confined within the factory and among coworkers. Moreover, the quality of their co-worker communication was compromised due to sedentary work, demanding work tasks, and co-worker education levels. Most often, they could only converse with a couple of coworkers sitting nearby and had to keep the exchange brief to concentrate on their task at hand. They were not expanding their horizons through limited communication with their co-workers, who shared similar backgrounds. Many of them

had relatively low levels of education and assumed repetitive tasks on assembly lines. As such, co-worker communication tended to homogenize them rather than expanding their imagination.

The communicative affordances of spatial-temporal materiality provide new insight into how materiality matters in organizing. Extant studies have illustrated that spatial features of the workplace offer cues to workers' identities; these features include its size, degree of openness, and decorative style (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cruz, 2015; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Novak, 2016; Rich, 2016). Research has also revealed that work's temporal features shape workers' perceived meaningfulness of work; these features include whether work time is shared, autonomous, punctuated, and complex (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Kuhn, 2006; Roy, 1959; Tang & Eom, 2019). My study builds on these insights to highlight that spatial and temporal features converge to shape worker identities, and more importantly, that spatial-temporal configurations function through their communicative affordances. Communicative affordances include whom workers can communicate with, how often and how long they can converse, and the content of their communication. All these aspects affect the quality of workplace communication, which shapes workers' imagination.

The impacts on workers' imagination of spatial-temporal configurations extend discussions on the constitutive role of materiality. Organizational communication scholars have argued for the constitutive role of materiality in organizing practices (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Gist-Mackey & Dougherty, 2020; Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019; Novak, 2016). Yet, existing conceptions of materiality have not adequately attended to the role of materiality in shaping workers' subjective realms. Some conceptions of materiality resemble a resource-centered approach. For example, Gist-Mackey and Guy (2019) conceived material reality for decision-making primarily as material resources, such as money, energy, and physical ability; Gist-Mackey and Dougherty

(2020) approached materiality as physical autonomy and skill. The resource-centered understanding is limited in that we tend to think of resources as things outside of our body, especially as tangible objects, estranging us from conceiving materiality as constitutive of our consciousness. Other conceptions of materiality incorporate a discussion of workers' bodies (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Novak, 2016). However, the discussion of the body is often limited to the physical well-being of workers, and the body is perceived as a cue for worker identity. By contrast, my findings reveal that materiality is more than resources for our decision-making or cues for our identity. Materiality plays a constitutive role in shaping workers' subjective realms. Before addressing the stakes of subjective realms, I discuss another set of constraints on workers' imagination.

### **Structural conditions as constraints**

Participants also revealed how structural conditions beyond the workplace limited their career choices and aspirations. The structural constraints they brought up include limited opportunities for formal employment, the rural/urban divide, and familial obligations. The former two constraints were tied to China's broader political and economic context, as discussed in Chapter Three. Before the 1980s, China was marked by an overall low level of economic development, and the rural area lagged significantly behind the urban area. The Chinese government implemented the *hukou* policy in the 1950s that divided the population into urban households and rural households (K. W. Chan, 2009; Cheng & Selden, 1994). This policy limited rural populations' access to employment, housing, and other social services in the city. Upon economic reforms in the 1980s, China's coastal areas attracted a large amount of foreign direct investment and established numerous export-oriented factories. Against this background, China's



export-oriented apparel manufacturing industry prospered along China's coastal regions (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011).

Meanwhile, migrant workers from rural villages gained opportunities to seek employment in these factories. Their labor made a significant contribution to China's urban development and the rise of China as the world's factory (Kim, 2013; C. K. Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005; Zhang, 2010). Their contribution also came with their sacrifices, as many suffered from prolonged work, poor remuneration, tight discipline, inhumane treatment, and continuous *hukou* restrictions (C. K. Lee, 1999; Lucas et al., 2013; Qiu, 2016; M. Yu & Crowley, 2020). The lived experience of apparel workers in my study provides a glimpse into these overlapping social constraints on migrant workers' career choices and aspirations.

These structural constraints affect participants not only materially but also discursively. Occupying marginalized social positions, migrant workers have to negotiate negative meanings associated with their work and identity. As shown in Yue Zhou's quote, seeking employment outside of her home province was called *dagong* (working, 打工), which highlights migrant workers' temporary and subordinate work status (Pun, 1999, 2005). *Dagong* contrasts with the notion of *gongren* (production worker, 工人) in China's socialist period that conveyed a sense of pride and nobility. Moreover, participants emphasized their low level of education and *di suzhi* (low quality, 低素质), demonstrating their internalizations of social discourses that degrade their value. In popular and governmental discourses, the rural population's *di suzhi* was deemed an impediment to China's modernization (Anagnost, 2004). Internalizing such discourses might have adversely affected migrant workers' camaraderie as they sought to distance themselves from other migrant workers (Gao & Qian, 2020).

Additionally, participants' accounts implied the lack of collective organizing among them, which reflects the broader social constraint on labor organizing in China. When asked about how to improve their well-being, participants mentioned their personal endeavors, the factory owners' voluntary implementations, and the government's supervision. They did not bring up workers' unions or associations, suggesting the union's absence in these factories. Moreover, their silence on workers' unions means that the participants had limited awareness of gaining negotiation power through collective organizing. Their experiences reflect the status of Chinese ineffective trade unionism. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the only legal trade union in mainland China is the All-China Federation of Trade Union (ACFTU) (C. K.-C. Chan, 2013). ACFTU has a limited presence and functions more as service providers and dispute mediators than an advocate for workers (F. Chen, 2016). Besides the socialist legacy and political authoritarianism, Chinese workers' labor rights have also been constrained by global capital, which has impeded collective bargaining through influencing Chinese local labor policies (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014). Altogether, participants' narratives explicitly and implicitly revealed a wide range of structural constraints on their career choices, mobility, and agency, which all impacted their aspirations. Next, I further address how constrained imagination, in turn, affected participants' agency.

### **The impacts of constrained imagination and “microemancipations”**

As explicated above, “constrained imagination” highlights participants' awareness of how work and social conditions actively limited their imagination. Despite their awareness, they were often unable to push against these limits. As a result, participants developed the ability to adapt themselves to their social environments. In extremely harsh conditions, participants persisted with the mindset to survive, as shown in Shushu Zheng's quotes: “You drank water from the

well. That was the case. You had no choices. You had to survive.” Shushu Zheng also mentioned the poor hygiene and nutrition of their meals provided at work: vegetables were not washed before cooking; almost no cooking oil was used; almost no meat was provided. Nevertheless, Shushu and her sister endured malnutrition and continuous work to support their family. Shushu Zheng’s experience reflected the working conditions in the 1990s. In recent years, meals, lodging, and work hours have all improved. Still, participants face continuous limits brought by the *hukou* policy and their limited social capital. Their propensity to adapt themselves to the environment continued, evidenced by the idiom “drifting with the current (*suibo zhuliu*, 随波逐流)” used by Mumu Shi. Drifting with the current captures Mumu’s readiness to follow social trends. These examples demonstrate that workers’ self-adaptability. Self-adaptability is not the same as consent (Burawoy, 1979). Participants were not being manipulated into work voluntarily to increase their productivity. Instead, amidst the lack of alternative options, participants worked hard voluntarily to meet their familial responsibilities (Westwood & Lok, 2003). They endured work and hardship despite their disgust and discontent with work. Overall, self-adaptivity focuses on participants’ individual changes to fit in the environment rather than demanding the transformation of the environment. Therefore, self-adaptivity is a passive orientation that contributes to the reproduction of workplace and social control.

However, self-adaptivity does not exclude workers’ emancipations, or what I call microemancipations. Self-adaptivity is not self-abandonment. Instead, participants waited for accidental opportunities to move out of their status quo. When opportunities arose, participants seized on them to move up to managerial positions in the factory, quit factory work, and even exit the apparel industry. For example, Yinyin Tao, a former sewer, moved up to a managerial position when the job opened. Yue Zhou withdrew from factory work and worked as an

independent tailor after a family trauma. Feng Zhao retired from the apparel industry after her factory was requisitioned. Similarly, Shushu Zheng quit the manufacturing industry after marriage. Moving up to managerial positions or non-factory settings allowed participants to enjoy greater information flow and broadened perspectives, giving them a sense of emancipation. I call these changes “microemancipations” as they brought small-scale liberation to participants’ imagination. Notably, my definition of microemancipations differs from its original meaning, which focuses on how mobilizing different identity frames helps resolve identity tensions (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Meisenbach, 2008).

Moreover, awareness of “constrained imagination” in factory work motivated participants to help their offspring avoid manufacturing jobs. As said, many participants disliked apparel work and its constraining effects. As such, they hoped that their offspring could assume alternative careers rather than suffering from factory work as they did. Despite their limited capacity, participants invested in the education and class mobility of their offspring to help them avoid factory jobs and find alternative careers. Participants also felt liberation through their children's better educational attainment and class mobility, which demonstrates another way for participants to experience microemancipations.

Participants’ experience of “constrained imagination” and their expected careers for their offspring provide new insight into work identities. Organizational studies and organizational communication scholars often focus on how workers craft positive selves at work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a) or positive work meanings, i.e., the point, purpose, or value of work (Kuhn et al., 2008) (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a). These studies tend to assume workers’ desire for positive identities and autonomy in pursuing them. By contrast, many participants in my study showed little interest in imbuing positive values to their occupations.

They retained their discontents with apparel work, affirmed its negative values, hoped for disengagement with it, and invested in younger generations' class mobility. Their negative attitude toward their work and their working-class position also contrasts the Working Class Promise, which describes strong class identification among working-class communities in the U.S. (Lucas, 2011b). My study thus offers cultural-specific insight into the concepts of work meanings, class, mobility, and agency.

Overall, building around the central theme “constrained imagination,” this chapter details how organizational and structural conditions limited participants' desires, thus constraining their careers and opportunities for change. I have argued for the significance of workers' capacity for imagination, drawing attention to the social formation of imagination, with salience for understanding work identities. I have also drawn attention to micro constraints at work, such as spatial-temporal materiality and macro structural limits in the Chinese context. Lastly, this chapter develops an understanding of how “constrained imagination” affected research participants' agency at work, considering the potential of “microemancipations.” In so doing, my findings contribute to ongoing interest in factory workers' agency as well as questions about the role of materiality and workplace control. While this chapter has focused attention on workers' (and managers') accounts and power dynamics in the domestic context, the next chapter shifts attention to owners (and managers) to interrogate development discourses.

## **CHAPTER 6: UPGRADING IDEALISM: INTERROGATING DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSES AMONG CHINESE APPAREL MANUFACTURING PRACTITIONERS**

This chapter explores Chinese apparel practitioners' perspectives on the value of apparel work and their desires for industrial upgrading. In Chapter Two, I developed a communicative approach to imagination that focuses on how workers' future-oriented desires were shaped by spatial-temporal configurations and local and macro discourses. Chapter Three introduces structural constraints and discourses unique to China that shape the work experiences of Chinese factory workers, especially apparel manufacturing workers. Chapter Four further articulated rationales for investigating workers' desires in Chinese apparel manufacturing through a qualitative approach. Chapter Five focused on how Chinese apparel production workers' career desires were constrained by spatial-temporal configurations and structural conditions in China. While Chapter Five attended to micro processes in the workplace and domestic constraints, this chapter shifts attention to macro development discourses and broader power dynamics in global production networks. This chapter does so by concentrating on owners and managers' imagination about the future of apparel manufacturing, particularly their desires for upgrading.

Attending to development discourses helps unpack the dilemma emerging in apparel practitioners'<sup>19</sup> accounts about the industry's future. Many apparel factories are short of ordinary and skilled production workers and have difficulty attracting younger generations. The employment challenge suggests the need to raise wages to boost employment. However, owners

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<sup>19</sup> As illustrated in Chapter 4, practitioners refer to all people working in an industry, including owners, managers, and ordinary workers. This chapter primarily draws on narratives from owners and managers. I used the all-encompassing term "practitioners" because I also brought in ordinary workers' accounts to contrast them with managerial discourses.

and managers were also concerned about rising wages would threaten their profits and thus jeopardize their businesses. This dilemma is well illustrated in the following comments by a former apparel factory owner, Tutu Hua:

Young people aren't willing to *gan* (engage in, 干) this (apparel manufacturing) ...If you work as an agent selling apartments, (your) commission of selling an apartment will be over 10,000 yuan. Now internet is so strong; you sell an apartment in a month, which is equal to *gan* (working) for two months in apparel. You say he *gan* or not? So, I think we should let the market govern in future. Your *gongzi* (commission) in selling apartments as an agent is too high; my *gongzi* (wages) in making apparel is too low. We need adjustment. Without adjustment, how many lives can an agent support? We for sure need manufacturing. But we face another problem. The *gongzi* (wage level) in Southeast Asia is too low. Eventually, those factories in big need (of labor) will move away (to Southeast Asia). This is such a high-end (*gaoduan*, 高端) issue. We small ordinary folks (*xiao laobaixing*, 小老百姓) probably can't fix it. (We) don't know to evaluate it, either. I feel the future of us, China, seems quite concerning regarding employment.

Tutu Hua's comments articulate a paradox between the need to raise domestic wages to attract younger generations and the threat of large apparel factories relocating overseas in search of lower wages. This paradox first reflects the lack of interest of younger generations in apparel manufacturing. Tutu attributed their little interest to low wages in apparel manufacturing compared to those in real estate agents and other service industries. However, Tutu did not consider the impact of discourses on the value of work on young people's career choices. Second, Tutu's quotes imply that raising wages for workers would hurt owners and managers' profits, pitting the interests of workers against owners and managers. Missing here was the mentioning of low profit margins of Chinese apparel manufacturers in current global production systems. Furthermore, the paradox reflects the trend of global capitalism's search for the lowest wages. It seems that Tutu perceived this trend as continuous and inevitable, indicating the need to explore further his beliefs about industrial development. Altogether, the paradox expressed by Tutu Hua stresses the need to interrogate discourses on the value of work and the path for

development. Surfacing practitioners' assumptions about work and development can illuminate ways to revisit the dilemma they felt irresolvable.

A significant discourse circulating among Chinese apparel practitioners concerns industrial upgrading, referring to firm initiatives to change products or processes to capture more profits in supply chains (Bair & Gereffi, 2003). Examining practitioners' attitudes towards upgrading can reveal how they evaluate apparel work. Their job appraisals will offer insight into the general image of apparel manufacturing, which can help us better understand the industry's difficulty in recruitment, retainment, and cultivation of young and skilled workers. A critical interrogation can also illuminate multi-dimensional effects of upgrading and surface significant assumptions about development, thus opening up alternative imaginations of the future of apparel manufacturing. This chapter focuses on the perspectives of industrial practitioners in Chinese apparel manufacturing, a key site of China's upgrading initiatives. In particular, I develop a richer understanding of what I call "upgrading idealism," or ideas about the necessity of upgrading for Chinese apparel manufacturing.

Core elements in upgrading idealism are represented by the acronym 3"Ds": depreciation of cut and sew, desires for upgrading, and development following Western countries. Upgrading idealism captures practitioners' negative evaluations of apparel manufacturing as low-end work, especially when it involved cutting and sewing. These negative associations are tied to longings for process and technological upgrading. Practitioners' desires for upgrading are also linked to their endorsement of a development pattern following the West, which generally refers to developed areas in the Western hemisphere, such as northwest Europe and the United States.

My construction of "upgrading idealism" builds on the notion of "devaluation" (Werner, 2016; Werner & Bair, 2011b) and "development idealism" (Thornton et al., 2015; Thornton &



Xie, 2016). Devaluation suggests that upgrading involves the transformation of labor's value to capital, i.e., an articulation of whose work and skills are valued (S. W. Barrientos, 2013; Werner, 2012). While devaluation is particular to upgrading, development idealism ("DI") addresses development more broadly. DI is a cultural model that supplies normative standards, aspirations, and behavior guidance related to development for nations, organizations, and individuals. The term "idealism" suggests that DI contains particular idealized beliefs about development. Two beliefs of interest to my study are a regional hierarchy that places Western countries at the top and a fairly homogenous development path derived from their history. Bridging devaluation and DI prompts me to examine how upgrading involves practitioners' articulations of different work's value and situate these interpretations within larger development discourses that involve regional hierarchies.

My research contributes to scholarship on upgrading and development studies by applying a critical discursive lens to industrial practitioners' perspectives on upgrading. I demonstrate that upgrading is not a mere economic endeavor but involves articulating work's value and constructing regional and national hierarchies shaped by development discourses. My analysis surfaces participants' optimistic, idealized notions of upgrading, the West, and development, which imply economic centrism and political conservatism. My critical reading of practitioners' paradoxical articulations of skill challenges economic centrism by revealing potentially negative consequences of upgrading on production workers and employment in manufacturing. I further critique political conservatism as it legitimizes existing regional hierarchies and unequal distribution of profits in supply chains. Altogether, my critical discursive lens challenges the idealization of upgrading, calls for more attention to social discourses that shape the value of work, and opens up room for alternative imaginations of development.

## **Upgrading and development discourses in China**

### **Upgrading and its discontents**

The notion of upgrading has gained currency in important national and international institutions, such as the World Bank, the WTO, and UN agencies (Werner, Bair, & Fernández, 2014). While upgrading is embraced and promoted by researchers and development agencies, associating upgrading with growth and development has also been challenged (Werner, 2016). Critical issues reside in the economic bias of upgrading that neglects the social impacts and fundamental social conditions which make upgrading possible.

The economy-centered approach to upgrading reflects its theoretical roots in Global Commodity Chains (GCC) (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994) and Global Value Chains (GVC) (Gereffi, Humphrey, & Sturgeon, 2005; Gibbon & Ponte, 2005). The notion of commodity chain was derived from the world-systems theory in the 1970s to account for the division of labor on the global scale that includes nations at the core and periphery, respectively. Building on the “chain” metaphor, GCC and GVC highlight interconnections of different elements in global production. GCC and GVC also differ from world-systems theory in that they focus on specific industries and firm-level analysis (Bair & Gereffi, 2003).

The notions of value and hierarchy lie at the core of upgrading. Upgrading is conceived as a move by suppliers who transform their products or processes to capture more value in supply chains (Bair & Gereffi, 2003). GVC pays particular attention to differential returns of value gained by firms or regions situated at different locations in supply chains. Chains are thought to be hierarchical. Firms or regions located higher in the chain reap greater value as higher positions typically have greater entry barriers for competitors. Value is conceived as higher returns brought by a monopoly effect (Werner, 2016). Value exists in technological,

organizational, and relational dimensions. Upgrading typically means using more advanced technologies, assuming more coordinating tasks, and moving up to branding (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011). As upgrading is defined as a process to gain more value, upgrading is expected to provide more economic benefits to firms and regions.

Responding to the critique on the lack of attention to social impacts, proponents of upgrading put forward the notion “social upgrading” to incorporate the social aspect of upgrading and examine the relationship between economic and social upgrading (e.g., Nathan et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that economic upgrading does not benefit all workers, especially women (S. Barrientos, Gereffi, & Rossi, 2011; J. Lee, Gereffi, & Lee, 2016). Moreover, participating in global production networks has also produced differential impacts on regions (Coe & Hess, 2011; Coe & Yeung, 2015). While these reflections on disparate social and spatial consequences are valuable, they only consider labor when examining the upgrading results and view uneven development as mere side effects of upgrading. They fail to interrogate the constitutive role of labor and uneven development in upgrading. Next, I demonstrate how the disarticulation perspective surfaces and challenges the fundamental premises of upgrading.

### ***Disarticulation and devaluation***

The notion of disarticulation was initially formulated by Werner and Bair to critique the “inclusionary” bias of GCC scholarship (Werner & Bair, 2011a). They call for more attention to the politics of exclusion during a region’s incorporation into GCC and highlight the constitutive relationship between inclusion and exclusion in the chains (Werner & Bair, 2011a). Later, Werner builds on the notion of disarticulation to illuminate how upgrading constitutes uneven development (Werner, 2016). Werner notes that in the process of upgrading, intra-national

competition can lead to the exodus of investment in subnational regions, suggesting regional disinvestment is constitutive of upgrading.

More importantly, Werner focuses on the constitutive role of devaluing certain work during upgrading. She reveals that upgrading involves the transformation of labor's value to capital, i.e., an articulation of whose work and skills are valued (S. W. Barrientos, 2013; Werner, 2012). While firms upgrade to reap more profits, certain types of work and skill are reserved and cherished, and other categories are often downplayed and devalued. To defer devaluation, firms often create more fine-grained job stratification. They relegate "low-skill" work to poorly remunerated temporary employees or outsource it to contracted tertiary firms. This externalized work does not disappear but is born by people who are usually already socially disadvantaged. From the viewpoint of labor, upgrading reproduces social inequality through job stratification and work externalization.

In short, the notion of upgrading gives preferential attention to economic benefits gained by firms and fails to consider the simultaneous reworking of labor's value and accompanying regional disparity. The disarticulation perspective, especially the notion of devaluation, recognizes upgrading involves meaning-making around work and skill. To further this line of critique, I introduce a discursive approach and situate upgrading within broader development discourses.

### **A discursive approach and development idealism**

A discursive approach views development as social discourses that guide economic actors' desires and decision-making. For example, according to Geny Piotti (2009) (cited in Beckert, 2013), discourses about great economic opportunities in China strongly motivated managers in German firms to relocate parts of their production to China. Some managers

recognized that their desire for outsourcing to China resembled “the Gold Rush in America” (Piotti 2009, p. 23) rather than being rooted in rational calculation. Media and industry organizations, such as chambers of commerce, presented overly optimistic portrayals of successful German firms operating in China, which misled the followers’ decision to relocate and often resulted in losses. This example illuminates the power of development discourses and their biases, suggesting the need for critical interrogations.

Research has explicated how geopolitical histories have shaped changing perceptions of development (Escobar, 2000, 2012) and illuminated key biases in conceptions of development, as shown in development idealism. Development idealism is a well-disseminated cultural model that supplies normative standards, aspirations, and behavior related to development for nations, organizations, and individuals (Thornton & Xie, 2016). These beliefs are derived from the development history of northwest Europe and regions populated by its diasporas.

Interrogating development idealism offers several important insights. First, development is a relational construct. The geopolitical relations and the contrast between Western powers and their colonies have played a crucial role in shaping what is considered “developed” and “underdeveloped” (Escobar, 2000, 2012). Second, the relationship implied in development is asymmetric and hierarchical. Development economists and other agencies believed that the developed West’s footsteps were to be followed by the underdeveloped areas of the rest of the world (Escobar, 2000, 2012). Third and relatedly, the notion of development assumes that societies can and should follow similar pathways (Thornton et al., 2015; Thornton & Xie, 2016). Fourth, economic growth was the main pursuit of development, and industrialization was viewed as the optimal driving force. Industrialization was viewed as a privileged area for investment to accumulate capital, facilitate modernization, cultivate a proper mentality suited for development

among backward countries (Escobar, 2012; Melkote & Steeves, 2014). These four aspects reflect key biases that are reproduced and maintained within development discourses.

My research adds to these important critiques by applying the discursive approach to upgrading. I argue that upgrading is a recent addition to development discourses. While early development discourses privilege industrialization, upgrading discourses further differentiate work within manufacturing and emphasize technology, knowledge, service, and branding (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011). The growing upgrading discourses also manifest the regional hierarchy in development idealism. The emergence of upgrading dovetails with the turn to post-Fordist organizing in the West, which shifts attention away from industrialization and manufacturing to service work (Kuhn, 2017; Muehlebach, 2011; Nadesan, 2001; S. Tracy, 2000). Embracing upgrading implicitly suggests a development path following the West's steps. A discursive approach to upgrading is important to China's apparel manufacturing in the context of China's employment dilemma and passion for development.

### **Employment and development in China**

Upgrading has become increasingly significant in China's apparel manufacturing sector. The Chinese government encourages Chinese apparel firms to upgrade production processes as well as move inland and overseas (Zhu & Pickles, 2014). While scholars have increasingly recognized the narrow conception and negative impacts of upgrading, it is yet to know how apparel practitioners understand the necessity and scope of upgrading.

Examining practitioners' perspectives on upgrading can offer insight into their job appraisals, shedding light on the employment dilemma in Chinese apparel manufacturing and manufacturing in general. In China, many firms have difficulty recruiting ordinary and skilled production workers, while a large number of recent college graduates suffer from unemployment

(Qian, 2020, October 15). The employment challenge is partly due to younger generations' lack of interest in manufacturing. Prevailing discourses on certain work's value or prestige are important to people's employment preferences (Long et al., 2016). Upgrading is a critical part of social discourses that shape the value of work and affect employment. A closer examination of the upgrading discourses from practitioners' perspectives can reveal the social image of manufacturing and contribute to an increased understanding of China's employment dilemma.

A critical interrogation of practitioners' narratives about upgrading can also illuminate the impact of development idealism on China in contemporary contexts. Development idealism has been assimilated by a large number of Chinese intellectuals and ordinary citizens (Xie, Thornton, Wang, & Lai, 2012). The emergence of Chinese development discourses was closely tied to China's modern history when China experienced military defeats by Western industrialized nations, such as Great Britain and France (Thornton & Xie, 2016). National humiliation prompted Chinese intellectuals to seek explanations and methods for self-salvage. A key lesson emerged through the slogan "the backward will be beaten," suggesting backwardness in the economy, military, and technology will bring about defeat and humiliation (Y. Wang, 2020). This slogan implied strategies to develop economic and military power through expanding industrial capacities and promote technology (Thornton & Xie, 2016). The historical background reveals important insights into China's attachment to development. The emergence of China's development idealism relates to the unequal relationship between China and Western powers. After military defeats, China regarded itself as lagging behind the West and aimed to develop by emulating it. Key to China's early development strategies was industrialization. Scrutinizing practitioners' perspective on upgrading will contribute novel insight into manifestations of

development idealism in the new chapter of China's economic development. In the following section, I further illustrate the significance of apparel manufacturing as a site of investigation.

### **Upgrading idealism among Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners**

Taken together, the practitioners I interviewed shared a broad desire for upgrading. Their articulations built the overarching theme “upgrading idealism”: beliefs about the necessity of upgrading for Chinese apparel manufacturing informed by Western countries' development history. Throughout the interviews, practitioners stressed a hierarchy among different industries through the notion of high-end (*gaoduan*, 高端) and low-end (*diduan*, 低端). They cast apparel manufacturing as a comparatively low-end industry. Furthermore, participants differentiated between work processes within apparel manufacturing itself, positioning cut and sew as low-end work while embracing design, branding, and marketing as more prestigious work. Participants' desire for process and technological upgrading was closely tied to their image of a technologically advanced West. They hoped China would emulate the development path of Western countries. The participants' construction of industrial and regional hierarchies and endorsement of a homogenous development ladder demonstrate their assimilation of development idealism, a well disseminated cultural model containing beliefs about development (Thornton et al., 2015; Thornton & Xie, 2016).

#### **Depreciating cut and sew as low-end work**

At the base of participants' beliefs about the necessity of upgrading is a negative appraisal of the current Chinese apparel manufacturing industry, especially cut and sew. The notion of low-end repeatedly occurred in the interviews. According to the participants, four overlapping characteristics define apparel manufacturing as a low-end industry: a low entry barrier, cheap labor, labor-intensive, and low value.



A low barrier to entry is key to the notion of “low-end.” A general understanding of “low-end” was offered by a former top manager (*changzhang*, 厂长), Lanlan Wei, who noted, “What I mean by low-end is basically no difficulty, basically reliant on cost efficiency (*xingjiabi*, 性价比) to win.” Lanlan Wei’s definition suggests that low-end industries have so few entry barriers that factories limit the production cost to gain market advantages. The tendency to cheapen wages is implied, as labor cost is a significant cost in apparel manufacturing. Low barriers also mean low qualifications for engaging with apparel manufacturing. For example, current owner Xixi Wang commented on practitioners in the industry, “Apparel manufacturing is too low-end, too miscellaneous (*fansuo*, 繁琐). Practitioners in the whole value chain are relatively (*bijiao*, 比较) ‘low.’” Xixi Wang used the English word “low” to characterize apparel practitioners, implying that they have limited education and skill. The term “miscellaneous” in the comment suggests that apparel manufacturing is labor-intensive where many work procedures require human labor.

A low barrier to entry is intertwined with the low value of apparel manufacturing. Former owner Tutu Hua who closed his factory during COVID-19 provided further illustrations:

Opening a garment factory (*zhiyichang*, 制衣厂) is an entry-level thing, no big deal. It is an ordinary deed. Regarding importance, garment factories belong to the end among all procedures; marketing and sales are at the front... The gross profit rate of a factory, I think, is just over ten percent. Very low. (It’s) because it is an industry without high added value. It is a stupid thing. Others give you a garment, and you make it. It is quite simple. Anyone can do it. The barrier to entry is low. It’s a thing uneducated folks can do. So, its added value is inevitably low.

Tutu Hua pointed out low profit rates of cut and sew facilities, which receive sample garments from buyers. Tutu Hua used a painting metaphor to illustrate cut and sew: “You give me a ladle, and I draw a ladle for you. I don’t need to think.” Tutu Hua compared making garments based on given samples to drawing an object by imitation. He thought the actual process of making garments as “simple” and “stupid,” not requiring education or thinking, and therefore not worthy

of much added value. Tutu Hua regarded opening cut and sew factories as “no big deal” and “an ordinary deed,” suggesting that owning such a factory did not bring a sense of achievement or pride. By contrast, Tutu Hua viewed marketing and sales as the most important processes in the apparel industry, which shaped his decision to run an online apparel retail store after closing his factory.

Besides small gross profit rates for owners and meager wages for workers, apparel manufacturing’s low value also means little tax for local governments. Several apparel owners of small-scale factories employing less than 30 workers reported that they and nearby factories did not pay taxes. Former worker and owner Zhong Qin recounted that the local government in his city expelled denim washing and other apparel factories to make room for other industries that generated more revenues and taxes. Zhong Qin said, “Factories only with manufacturing capacities, I think, should be eliminated (*taotai*, 淘汰). Nothing surprising. If your labor cost is too high, you will be eliminated.” Echoing Lanlan Wei’s comment on cost efficiency, Zhong Qin thought that cut and sew facilities lost room for survival in market competition when their labor cost went up. Additionally, Zhong Qin implied that struggling cut and sew facilities were not worth being saved by local governments.

In sum, industrial practitioners collectively constructed cut and sew-based apparel manufacturing as a low-end industry. They characterized low-end by a low barrier to entry, cheap labor, labor-intensive, and low value. The term “low” in “low-end” implies practitioners’ depreciation of cut and sew-related activities, which did not provide them with a sense of pride when engaging with such work and its practitioners. These negative appraisals of cut and sew provoked the practitioners’ desire for upgrading, as discussed next.

## Desiring process and technological upgrading

While participants shared a consensus on the need for upgrading, they articulated different methods for upgrading. Two approaches stood out in their narratives: process expansion and technological updates. Process expansion entails moving from cut and sew to free on board (FOB) production. Tutu Hua illustrated his understanding of process upgrading:

You have to use your brain and experience. You need to buy fabrics for him. The more things you do, the more added value you have. If others don't even offer a picture, but only ideas, and you are responsible for developing and making the products, your profit rates will be higher. This is upgrading. Further upgrading to what I did, in plain words, is to research and develop, produce, and sell on your own. I bore the risk of sales. I bore everything. My profit rates were for sure higher.

This quote captures Tutu Hua's appreciation of the experience and mental work in fabric purchase and design. FOB suppliers assume more responsibilities, especially fabric sourcing. According to Tutu Hua, purchasing fabric involves "skill (*jishu*, 技术) and experience" and creates room for added value because one's knowledge in fabrics can help them obtain needed materials at a lower price. Furthermore, Tutu Hua regarded apparel design highly, evidenced in his comment that making a product out of buyer-provided pictures or ideas required "brain and experience" and "imagination and abilities." For him, the design process is filled with mental activities, starkly contrasting with cut and sew that does not require thinking. The most advanced manufacturing form to Tutu Hua involves independent research and development, production, and sale. Tutu Hua believed the more tasks and risks a producer bears, the more added value and profits it creates.

Tutu Hua's notion of upgrading focused on expanding production processes to capture more value (Bair & Gereffi, 2003). By contrast, Xixi Wang approached upgrading through technological transformation:

It quite has a technological feel (*kejigan*, 科技感), because it is made to order. It involves a lot of automation, graphic design, and digital technology. So, this type of factory has a higher barrier to entry after it's established. It is different from apparel factories that run (after you) buy some machine and recruit some production workers (*gongren*, 工人). This business needs a whole work team... We hope to integrate the retail market and factories with information technologies to plan for production based on sales. So, there is no inventory, no waste, and not much pollution. We hope to change the future of the apparel industry in this way.

Dissatisfied with prevailing business modes in apparel manufacturing that rely on cheap labor, Xixi Wang sought to transform apparel making through informational technologies. His factory manufactured and exported customized clothes for sports teams, a business involving technology-based graphic design, printing, precise process control, and sales. These technologies enabled Xixi Wang to differentiate his startup from conventional apparel factories. Xixi Wang also hoped to get rid of inventories and minimize waste by made-to-order, which differs from Tutu Hua's former factory that bore sales risks. Technological innovation brought Xixi Wang not only better profits but also pride and pleasure in his work. Xixi Wang's pride was evident in the perceived uniqueness of his factory, the word "team" for his workgroup, and his ambition to transform Chinese apparel manufacturing.

The above narratives illustrate practitioners' upgrading idealism by demonstrating their positive appraisal of upgrading. Upgrading encompasses not only added value in the economic sense but also elevated importance of certain work in normative terms. According to Tutu Hua and Xixi Wang, process or technological upgrading entails moving up to a position that has a high barrier to entry, which could be knowledge in fabrics, design abilities, capacities for production and sales, and technological affordances. Upgrading is believed to bring more profits to manufacturers and enables practitioners to imbue pride in their work. My analysis below demonstrates that practitioners' articulations of low-end work and desires for upgrading are linked to their perceptions of the West's development.

## Developing following the West

Important to practitioners' understanding of upgrading are the image of a technologically advanced West and a desire for China to conform to this image. For example, current top manager Shui Cao was interested in visiting Japanese apparel factories to learn about their management and methods to improve product quality and efficiency. Current director in back processes (*houzheng*, 后整) Yinyin Tao would like to visit Japan, South Korea, and the United States to observe their production processes. Shui Cao and Yinyin Tao expressed interest in concrete management and production methods. More broadly, practitioners looked up to the West for a development path and hoped China would catch up with Western countries.

Participants noticed that Western countries abandoned low-end and embraced high-end industries in their development history. When describing apparel manufacturing in the United States, former owner Zhong Qin commented, "I think the United States is so strong in high, fine, cutting-edge (*gaojingjian*, 高精尖) technologies. I think it does not need these low-end industries." Zhong Qin revealed that the United States had gone through upgrading by outsourcing low-end apparel manufacturing and specializing in advanced technologies. Referring back to his former comment that China should eliminate uncompetitive cut and sew facilities, we can infer that Zhong Qin's expectation of China's industrial upgrading was shaped by his perception of upgrading in the United States.

Some practitioners explicitly articulated a development path following the West through low-end industrialization and then upgrading. For example, Tutu Hua noted,

In the past, the living standards in Western countries improved; the overall price for goods went up; wages became higher. They abandoned these low-end industries and gave them to China. Then China becomes the world's factory... In those years, we Chinese grabbed jobs from other countries in the world... As we have developed into this stage, we have to brainstorm ways to do high-end businesses to grab jobs from Western countries. Right? Southeast Asians are following our past steps, grabbing the first station.

Tutu Hua linked China's economic development to industrial upgrading in the West, as he attributed China's emergence as the world's factory to its receipt of low-end industries abandoned by Western countries. As China's economy has developed, Tutu Hua thought China should now follow the West's steps by investing in high-end industries and compete with the West. Moreover, Tutu Hua saw Southeast Asians were repeating China's development pathway by introducing low-end industries, which he perceived as "the first station." The "station" metaphor implies a linear notion of development with established routes and stages countries are expected to go through. It also suggests a progression hierarchy that places the West at the forefront, China in the middle, and Southeast Asia at the end, manifesting Tutu Hua's assimilation of development idealism (Thornton et al., 2015; Thornton & Xie, 2016).

This development hierarchy was also applied to apparel manufacturing, as Xixi Wang described:

Europe and America still have apparel factories. Apparel factories in Europe are very small. However, their sales are not lower than yours, and their profits are not lower than yours. Their products are high, fine, and cutting-edge (gaojingjian), such as LV and Armani. They make more money than you...Because we require no mistake in each garment and no error in information on each page, its informationalization is quite good; it has its core competitiveness. And this thing can't be done in South Asia.

This quote implies that Xixi Wang hierarchized Europe, China, and South Asia in apparel manufacturing. Xixi Wang visited apparel factories in Holland, Italy, and Spain in 2019 to learn about their digital printing technologies. He found that despite China's challenge, middle-and-high-end technologies and high value-adding activities in apparel manufacturing still existed in Europe. Xixi Wang concluded that China's technology, design, research, and development lagged behind Europe. However, Xixi Wang had faith in China's technological advantage over South Asia, as he did not believe South Asia reached sophisticated digitalization as his factory

did. In short, Xixi Wang also assimilated development idealism and looked up to the West for technological upgrading.

This section adds nuance to practitioners' upgrading idealism by showing its hierarchical notions of development. Practitioners constructed a regional hierarchy that positions developed countries ahead of China and hoped China to emulate the development path of Western countries through process and technological upgrading. These narratives convey optimistic accounts of upgrading and the West, demonstrating that upgrading idealism constitutes a new form of development idealism. However, a closer examination of the participants' narratives surfaces economic centrism, revealing potentially adverse outcomes of upgrading on workers and employment.

### **Challenging economic centrism: Paradoxical articulations of skill**

Conceptions of skill (*jishu*, 技术) are critical to industrial practitioners' understanding of upgrading. The above section centers on owners and managers' perspectives on upgrading. In this section, I introduce workers' alternative articulations of skill that surface and challenge economic centrism in upgrading idealism. My close reading identified contradictory appraisals of sewers' skill and diverging perceptions on upgrading's impacts on production workers' skill.

#### **Depreciating vs. appreciating sewing**

Owners/managers tended to perceive little or no skill in sewing, which shaped their depreciation of cut and sew and provoked their desire for upgrading. Sewing is not a natural ability but acquired through training. For instance, current owner Juju He provided training to newly recruited sewers. However, sewers' skill is marginalized in managerial narratives. During my interview with current owner Lulu Sun, her daughter Mei commented that apparel manufacturing involved little skill. Cut and sew is the core target of critique regarding apparel

manufacturing's low skill. As mentioned earlier, Tutu Hua regarded cut and sew as "simple" and compared it to "drawing a ladle without thinking." Tutu Hua did not acknowledge skill in cut and sew, even though his factory was based on the whole-garment mode rather than assembly lines. Instead, he emphasized the need for skill in fabric purchase and design, in both of which he had engaged. For Tutu Hua, skill meant experience and mental work that involved imagination. In short, Tutu Hua and Mei did not regard sewing as skilled work.

A closer reading reveals that owners/managers' conceptions of skill were closely related to its potential to create value in the economic sense. They perceived cut and sew as low-skilled work because it was low value-adding. For example, Zhong Qin pointed out that sewers' daily outputs were too limited, and so was their output value in the export-oriented factory where he worked. In other words, sewers' productivity had limits, and their labor did not create large profits due to the low contracted price per garment. By contrast, owners and managers regard higher value-adding activities, such as fabric sourcing, design, and automation, as more skilled, shown in examples discussed in former sections.

By contrast, sewers provided a more nuanced understanding of skill, appreciating sewing whole garments as skilled work. For example, former sewer Yang Zhang said, "Not everyone can make a whole garment. You must have strong skill (*jishu guoying*, 技术过硬) to make whole garments. Generally, people who stay in the industry for just a couple of years can't make whole garments." This quote points out that whole garment-making, unlike what Tutu Hua said, required a lot of experience and skill. Skill levels also vary among sewers who can make whole garments; current sewer Long Han commented on this: "Some people can't do well after many years. Some people do well after two to three years." Long Han was among those who did well, as she said, "The product I make is very good. I mean I make them fast and the products are very



nice.” This quote reveals Long Han’s pride in her aesthetically appealing products and good skill. Long Han’s high skill level was also evidenced by her monthly income, which ranked first among sewers in her factory. The sewer in the second place made less than half of Long Han’s income. Long Han acknowledged it was not easy for sewers to achieve such a high level of skill. In short, Yang Zhang and Long Han both articulated that sewing whole garments was skilled work requiring experience and even talent, contrasting with the managerial claim that cut and sew involves low or little skill.

Sewers’ conceptions of skill had less focus on economic value than those articulated by owners and managers. According to Yan Zhang and Long Han, sewing skill entailed experience, efficiency, and product quality. A sewer needed a couple of years of work and learning to master making a whole garment. Among those who were able to make whole garments, efficiency and product quality further differentiated their skill levels. These articulations focused on sewers’ ability and their products rather than profits they could bring to the company.

### **Upgrading vs. degrading production workers’ skill**

Owners/managers and sewers also diverged in their appraisals of technological upgrading, and its impacts on workers’ skill. A key technological advancement is the introduction of assembly lines and automated equipment. As said earlier, owner Xixi Wang emphasized digitalization and automation, implicitly associating technology with skill upgrading. However, chief financial officer Yunyun Qian’s narratives indicate the negative impacts of automation on production workers’ skill:

I don’t know what restructuring means. I often hear people talk about restructuring here...Before it (apparel) was made manually; now it is made by the computer; this is restructuring. There is no skill (jishu). You just enter (commands) after buying machines...Before, everyone operated one machine. Now it is computer-controlled. You enter data, or action you need. A person can look after a couple of machines. The machines have no issues. You just walk around to check them.

Yunyun Qian pointed out that circulating discourses of restructuring lacked concrete interpretations. After I mentioned restructuring from labor-intensive to capital/technology/skill-intensive, Yunyun Qian recognized restructuring from manual work to automation as his factory adopted assembly lines and introduced automated machines. Yunyun Qian stated the automated production process required no skill from production workers because they only needed to enter commands in computers and walk around to check the machines. This description suggests that production workers played a minimal role in the automated production process.

The negative impacts of technological upgrading were also evident in sewers' job preferences against assembly lines. Sewer Long Han noted, while owners often preferred assembly lines for their efficiency, she liked traditional whole-garment making more, which provided her with more autonomy and pleasure at work. Conversely, former sewer Feng Zhao working on assembly lines, expressed strong dislike in her work by describing her workplace as "shitty factory (*pochangzi*, 破厂子). These two examples demonstrate that despite bringing more profits to companies, technological upgrading contradicts production workers' autonomy and mind/body integration.

The historical transformation of labor processes in apparel production offers insight into the benefits and cost of technological upgrading. Traditional tailors mastered the whole process of garment-making from design to sale. They enjoyed greater autonomy, and their work integrated mental and manual components. Assembly line-based factory systems lowered production costs but reduced production workers' autonomy and subjected them to rigid factory disciplines (Collins, 2003). Moreover, factory systems separated work conceptualization (e.g., design) from execution (e.g., cut and sew), leading to the degrading of production workers' skill and meaningfulness (Braverman, 1974). Singling out cut and sew from design explains why Tutu

Hua compared cut and sew to “drawing a ladle” without thinking. This separation between conceptualization and execution is antithetical to production workers’ mind/body integration.

In short, my analysis reveals that an economy-centric understanding of upgrading affects practitioners’ conceptions of skill and job appraisals. Upgrading involves articulating what counts as skill and what skill is important to production. Skill and economic value constitute each other in managerial understandings of upgrading. A value-based articulation of skill privileges certain forms of work and knowledge (e.g., automation and design) and marginalizes other types of labor and outcomes (e.g., cut and sew and producing aesthetically appealing products).

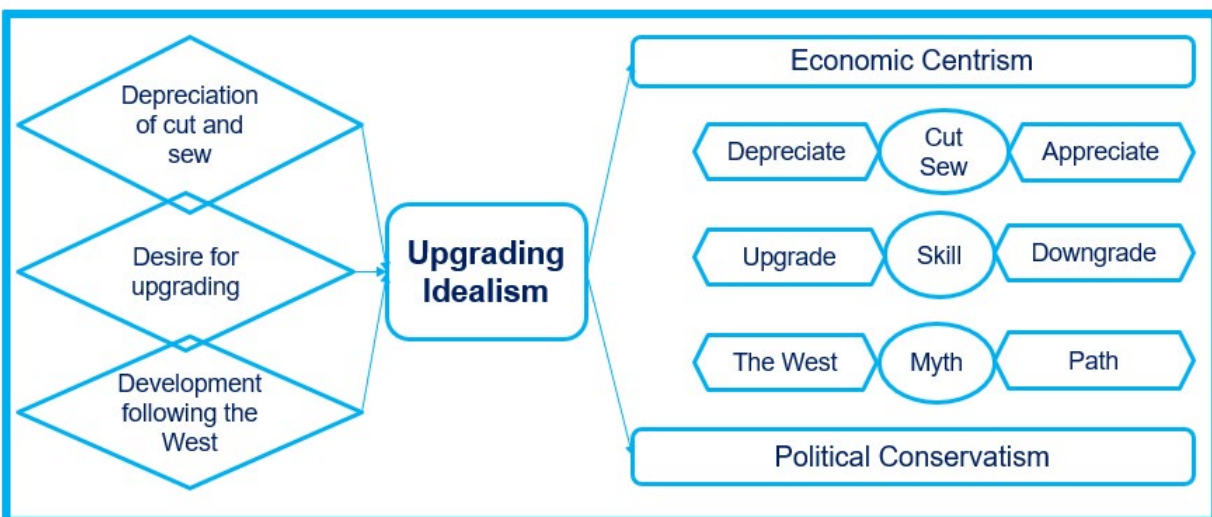
Upgrading idealism is also likely to exaggerate the employment dilemma in apparel production and manufacturing in general (Qian, 2020, October 15). As cut and sew is a core part of apparel production, I argue that depreciating cut and sew contributes to the overall low prestige of apparel manufacturing in public imaginations. The depreciated image of manufacturing work disincentivizes younger generations from engaging with it who value the prestige of work (Long et al., 2016). Despite practitioners’ faith in it, technological upgrading is unlikely to rescue manufacturing’s overall low image as automation further devalues front-line production. Additionally, even though automation elevates the importance of engineering, younger generations associate engineering with dirty and dangerous work (Berkelaar et al., 2012). Altogether, the negative images of cut and sew and manufacturing, in general, can impede manufacturing firms’ recruitment, retainment, and cultivation of young and skilled workers.

## Conclusion: The myth of development

This chapter (see Figure 9) contributes a discursive approach to upgrading that excavates meaning-making about the value of work and the path for development. I coined the term “upgrading idealism” to capture Chinese apparel manufacturing practitioners’ perspectives on upgrading. My analysis revealed that participants cast apparel manufacturing, especially cut and sew, as low-end work and expressed a strong desire for process and technological upgrading. Critically, this longing was imbricated in the participants’ admiration for the technologically advanced West and endorsement of a development path following the West’s steps. A closer examination of participants’ paradoxical articulations of skill surfaced and challenged economic centrism in upgrading idealism by demonstrating potential negative impacts of upgrading on production workers and employment in manufacturing. By way of concluding, I situate upgrading idealism within broader development discourses and further problematize its conservative political orientation.

### Figure 9

Illustration of Upgrading Idealism



My research contributes to development studies by demonstrating that upgrading idealism constitutes a recent iteration of development idealism (DI) in China (Thornton et al., 2015; Thornton & Xie, 2016). Upgrading idealism aligns with DI in that it constructs a regional hierarchy that positions Western developed countries ahead of China and a fairly homogenous industrial development path for China to follow. Economic centrism in upgrading idealism also reflects DI's focus on economic growth as the driving force for development. Conversely, DI is updated by upgrading idealism which shows that development also involves articulations about hierarchies of industries and work processes. While technology remains a dominant theme, upgrading idealism suggests recent shifts of attention to branding and service work from industrialization, which was privileged in early development discourses (Escobar, 2012; Melkote & Steeves, 2014).

In line with extant critiques of development idealism (Escobar, 2000, 2012), I challenge upgrading idealism's economic centrism, idealization of the West, and attachment to a homogenous development path. First, upgrading idealism was premised on an economy-centered understanding of upgrading, viewing upgrading as capturing more value, i.e., profits in production (Bair & Gereffi, 2003). The profit-driven approach to upgrading led to differential appraisals of work processes based on their profit rates. Diverging appraisals contributed to job stratification and externalization of work in apparel production (Werner, 2012). In the case of technological upgrading, while bringing more profits to the company, it may decrease workers' autonomy, degrade production workers' skill, and reduce their pleasure at work.

Second, participants constructed an overly positive image of a technologically advanced West and admired Western countries' success in industrial upgrading away from traditional manufacturing. These narratives ignored the tolls of deindustrialization on production workers

and community life, poverty, and other social issues within these countries. Also, participants largely attributed Western countries' prosperity to their higher technologies, neglecting how immigrant labor and resources from developing countries have been contributing to the West's development (Sassen, 1998).

The third issue in upgrading idealism was the construction of a fairly homogenous development path. Participants believed that China should follow the footsteps of the West regarding industrial upgrading. The formula for progress distilled from the social history of the West may be a poor fit for China and other countries as they have radically different historical contexts from Western countries (Frank, 1966, September). The attachment to a similar development pattern disincentivizes exploration of alternative modes of development.

The above three limits altogether lead to a conservative orientation, which is consequential for the future of Chinese manufacturing. While upgrading idealism embraces change for economic gains, it is politically conservative in that it fails to challenge broader unequal geopolitical relations and even contributes to their reproduction. In current global production systems, lead buyers in the West with design capacities are more advantaged in profit distribution than manufacturers in developing countries (Nathan et al., 2016). Facing low contracted prices and small profit margins (Zhu & Pickles, 2014), Chinese apparel practitioners focus on internal firm-level changes to gain economic benefits rather than challenging unequal profit distribution in global supply chains. By positioning the West on the top of China, upgrading idealism implicitly legitimizes the West's advantage in existing profit distribution systems of global commodity chains. Continuing this system harms production workers who labor under low wages worldwide, not just those in Chinese factories. Upgrading idealism

sidelines manufacturing practitioners' discontent with disadvantaged positions and reproduces regional and national hierarchies.

The employment and development dilemma in the opening of this chapter might be resolved with reimagined development patterns. If the existing global production system and its profit distribution are overhauled, Chinese apparel factories may have increased power to negotiate their garment prices, rearrange their work rhythms, increase workers' wages and benefits, stress the quality of products and pleasure of work, and thus attract younger generations. At the same time, the conventional pattern of outsourcing for the sake of low wages will also be suspended, ameliorating the concerns about factory relocation and worker unemployment in China.

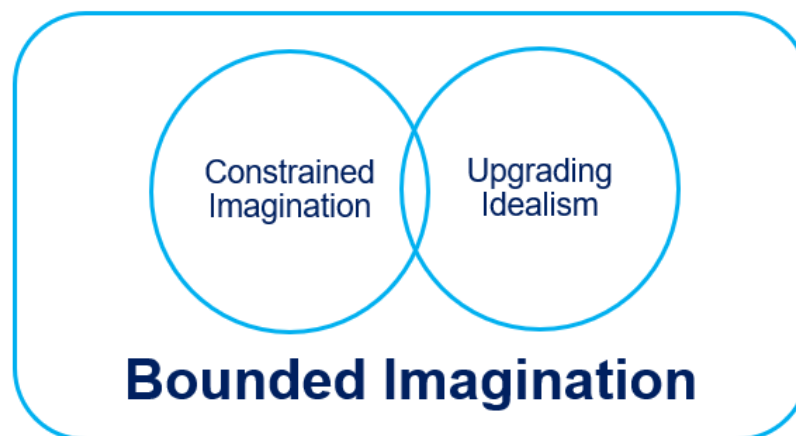
Altogether, my critical discursive approach challenges the idealization of upgrading and demonstrates that upgrading involves articulating work's value and constructing regional and national hierarchies. I extend critiques of upgrading by focusing on workers' autonomy, pleasure, and a sense of achievement at work, which are important to employment in manufacturing. The employment challenge further suggests the need for closer attention to social discourses that shape the value of work. My analysis also illuminates how Western histories shape Chinese practitioners' imagination of development, which suffers from economic centrism and political conservatism. I call for more robust critical analyses that reveal assumptions and biases in conceptions of development to open up room for imagining alternative paths.

## CHAPTER 7: IMAGINATION UNBOUND

This chapter closes the dissertation by highlighting its contributions and implications. I begin by comparing and contrasting “constrained imagination” and “upgrading idealism” developed in Chapter Five and Chapter Six, respectively. These two themes are constitutive of “bounded imagination”—a central concept introduced in Chapter Two (see Figure 10). Then I explicate how “bounded imagination” contributes to scholarship on worker identities and development. Next, I reflect on the impacts of my particular methodological approaches on the research outcomes, providing lessons for future research. This chapter concludes with practical implications along with my contemplative thoughts.

### Figure 10

Illustration of Bounded Imagination





## **Constrained imagination vs. upgrading idealism**

“Constrained imagination” and “upgrading idealism” both capture Chinese apparel practitioners’ future-oriented desires but differ in several regards. First, “constrained imagination” is primarily derived from production workers’ narratives, while “upgrading idealism” is distilled from owners and managers’ accounts. Second, “constrained imagination” relates to production workers’ career aspirations and ideas about the possibilities of industrial transformation. By contrast, “upgrading idealism” focuses on owners and managers’ imagination about the future of apparel manufacturing, particularly their desires for upgrading. “Upgrading idealism” involves three basic elements represented by the acronym 3“Ds”: depreciation of cut and sew, desires for upgrading, and development following Western countries.

The third and core difference between “constrained imagination” and “upgrading idealism” lies in practitioners’ awareness. “Constrained imagination” is a participant-articulated work identity. Chapter Five shows that production workers felt and enunciated that their imagination was constrained. Contrarily, “upgrading idealism” is a researcher-crafted identity. Based on owners and managers’ narratives about upgrading, I concluded that their perspectives on upgrading were idealized and constrained. In other words, participants themselves did not acknowledge their constrained ideas about upgrading.

Fourth, “constrained imagination” and “upgrading idealism” involve different sets of constraints. “Constrained imagination” is primarily associated with spatial-temporal materiality in factory settings as well as the domestic employment context, including the rural/urban divide, the *hukou* policy, and ineffective labor organizing. “Upgrading idealism” addresses the impacts of long-existing development discourses and relates to uneven development on the international scale.

Fifth and relatedly, these constraints affected participants' imagination through different mechanisms. The spatial-temporal materiality in factories shaped workers' imagination through its communicative affordances. Communicative affordances include whom workers can communicate with, how often and how long they can converse, and the content of their communication. In isolated factory settings, production workers lacked interaction with outsiders. Due to prolonged work hours, they had little time to socialize with other people outside of work. While at work, their communication with co-workers was often brief because of sedentary work, work demands, and, in some scenarios, tight supervision. Moreover, their limited co-worker communication tended to not bring new information or yield new ideas as they shared similar personal backgrounds and undertook similar tasks at work. Overall, production workers had limited opportunities to engage with quality communication and obtain new information and different ideas. They felt constrained in their immediate workplace to imagine alternative modes of work or a different future for the industry. The domestic employment context exacerbates the constraints brought by spatial-temporal materiality. Many apparel workers are migrant workers who have limited formal education due to family poverty. They sought urban employment to support themselves and their families. In addition to limited employment opportunities, they also face barriers to obtaining urban residency and social welfare due to China's *hukou* policy (K. W. Chan, 2009; Cheng & Selden, 1994). Altogether, limited employment opportunities, a low level of social capital, familial responsibilities, and the lack of social support confined many production workers within the manufacturing sector.

By contrast, "upgrading idealism" relates to participants' assimilation of prevailing macro-level development discourses and the recent iteration of upgrading discourses. These discourses carry beliefs about regional hierarchies and prescribe development paths (Thornton &

Xie, 2016). Development economists and international development agencies played a critical role in formulating strategies for development based on the history of western countries; they actively disseminated these strategies to areas they believed “underdeveloped,” such as Latin America (Escobar, 2000, 2012). Key to development discourses is the belief that the developed West’s footsteps were to be followed by the rest of the world (Escobar, 2000, 2012; Thornton et al., 2015; Thornton & Xie, 2016). Research has also examined the emergence and dissemination of development discourses in China (Y. Wang, 2020; Xie et al., 2012). My study identifies the parallel between participants’ beliefs about upgrading and core ideas in development discourses. Future research could further reveal how development discourses have been disseminated among and assimilated by industrial practitioners.

### **Constrained imagination & upgrading idealism**

Despite the above distinctions, “constrained imagination” and “upgrading idealism” are deeply intertwined. They both involve practitioners’ negative appraisals of apparel manufacturing. Production workers’ dissatisfaction with apparel making runs parallel to owners and managers’ depreciation of cut and sew. Their negative appraisals are tied to the historical formation of apparel manufacturing. Modern apparel manufacturing emerged through the labor process transformation from individualized whole-garment making to standardized manufacturing under factory systems. Traditionally, a tailor can make a whole garment that fits specific individuals. In the late 19th and early 20th century, standardization of sizes and the division of labor made possible mass production of garments at a low cost under the factory system (Collins, 2002, 2003). In this system, each worker receives a bundle of garments, completes one operation on each of them, re-ties the bundle, and passes on the bundle to the next

worker. With simplified work processes, assembly lines have improved productivity and reduced the needed time for training new sewers.

Meanwhile, production workers assuming single operations on assembly lines have less autonomy and decreased skills (Braverman, 1974). “Constrained imagination” captures production workers’ lack of autonomy and its negative impacts on their imagination.

“Constrained imagination” reveals production workers’ discontent with cut and sew work on assembly lines. Their dissatisfaction with work is further evidenced by their investment in their offspring’s education and alternative careers. Similarly, the relatively low skill level required for assembly line work contributes to the managerial appraisal of cut and sew as “low-end” work, a basic belief in “upgrading idealism.”

Practitioners’ negative appraisals of apparel manufacturing are further shaped by the low profit rates of apparel manufacturing. Myriad factors in domestic and global political and economic relations result in the overall low profit margins in the apparel manufacturing industry in China (Zhu & Pickles, 2014). Chinese apparel manufacturers, especially cut and sew, are often subject to conditions and price pressure imposed by global lead buyers in developed countries (Nathan et al., 2016; Zhu & Pickles, 2014). The historical relocation of apparel factories offers insight here. By the 1970s, many U.S.-based apparel firms closed their domestic production facilities and established assembly lines in low-wage locations, especially in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America (Collins, 2002). Since the 1980s, textile and apparel manufacturers from Hong Kong and Taiwan have invested heavily in mainland China. In both cases, relocating, outsourcing, and foreign direct investment were intentionally targeted at low-wage areas. Put more critically, foreign investors or buyers had invested interest in keeping workers’ wages low to maintain their profits. Their interest in sustaining low wages was

evidenced by cases in which they actively impeded workers' collective bargaining. For example, after the well-known strike in *Honda's* factory, global capitalists enounced objections in popular media and lobbied the Chinese local governments against their efforts to promote collective bargaining (C. K.-C. Chan, 2014). Therefore, examining workers' low wages and capital-labor relations in factories must consider international power relations. In my interviews, owners and managers reported price limits set by buyers, rising rents, and increasing domestic market competition, all of which negatively affected their profit margins and the piece rates they could offer to their employees. The low piece rates corresponded to production workers' poor remuneration and hard work mentioned in Chapter Five.

Practitioners' negative appraisals provoked their desires for change, and such desires also shared basic beliefs. For production workers, they felt constrained to pursue alternative careers or imagine a better future for the apparel manufacturing industry. They resorted to investing in offspring's education and class mobility to help them avoid manufacturing jobs. For owners, they remained in the apparel industry and desired process or technological upgrading to enlarge their profit margins. While these desires seem different, they share the assumption that knowledge and service work are more valuable, prestigious, and worth pursuing than traditional manufacturing work. Such a belief dovetails with the turn to post-Fordist organizing in the West, which shifts attention away from industrialization and manufacturing to service work (Kuhn, 2017; Muehlebach, 2011; Nadesan, 2001; S. Tracy, 2000).

More importantly, development pathways prescribed in "upgrading idealism" may reproduce and even exacerbate workers' "constrained imagination." As analyzed in Chapter Six, "upgrading idealism" involves an economy-centric understanding of upgrading. The profit-driven approach to upgrading led to differential appraisals of work processes based on their

profit rates. Diverging appraisals contributed to job stratification and externalization of work in apparel production (Werner, 2012). In the case of technological upgrading, while bringing more profits to the company, automation may further decrease workers' autonomy, degrade production workers' skill, and reduce their pleasure at work. In other words, "upgrading idealism" considers ways to accumulate economic value rather than developing a well-rounded business model that includes workers' autonomy, pleasure, and satisfaction. As such, "upgrading idealism" is less likely to resolve spatial-temporal constraints in factory work and thus contribute to the reproduction of workers' "constrained imagination." Moreover, "upgrading idealism" implies the relocation of low-value-adding cut and sew elsewhere rather than reflecting on the factory system and uneven distribution of profits in global productions. Even if upgrading successfully boosts Chinese manufacturers' profits, continuing the current system harms production workers who labor under low wages elsewhere.

Overall, "constrained imagination" and "upgrading idealism" have several differences and yet, are fundamentally connected. "Constrained imagination" describes the hardship and challenges associated with apparel manufacturing, which helps us make sense of "upgrading idealism." "Constrained imagination" also offers workers' viewpoints that facilitate my critique of economic centrism and political conservatism in "upgrading idealism." Conversely, "upgrading idealism" assists me in identifying the implicit influence of development discourses in "constrained imagination." "Constrained imagination" and "upgrading idealism" are both manifestations of "bounded imagination," as addressed next.

### **"Bounded imagination" and its contributions**

"Bounded imagination" describes how people's future-oriented desires are shaped by communicative practices. More specifically, it attends to the limiting of imagination by spatial-

temporal materiality at work and local and macro discourses. These limits may be recognized or unrecognized. “Constrained imagination” draws attention to worker-recognized limits of spatial-temporal materiality, which includes the spatial trap and temporal bind of factory work. By contrast, “upgrading idealism” addresses the limiting of development discourses on owners and managers’ desires for upgrading, who did not recognize the limits as such. Reading “constrained imagination” and “upgrading idealism” interchangeably, I reveal above that production workers also subscribed to development discourses, evidenced by the career they hoped for their offspring; I also critique that owners and managers failed to challenge the existing spatial-temporal materiality of factory work. “Constrained imagination” and “upgrading idealism” provide unique and equally important manifestations of “bounded imagination.” Both are indispensable blocks to construct the whole picture of “bounded imagination” among Chinese apparel practitioners. Together, “bounded imagination” illuminates that Chinese apparel practitioners’ future-oriented desires, whether it being their career aspirations, their ideas about their offspring’s career, and their imagination about the industry’s future, are shaped by the spatial-temporal materiality of factory work and development discourses. My research on “bounded imagination” has broader theoretical implications for research on worker identities and development.

### **Worker identities**

My research contributes to scholarship on worker identities or worker subjectivities by demonstrating that workers’ imagination is an important site to explore workplace control and resistance. The interplay between worker identities and organizational control and resistance has been a key theme in numerous factory ethnographies (e.g., Cross, 2011; Freeman, 2000; Hewamanne, 2008; Kim, 2013; C. K. Lee, 1998; Lynch, 2007; Salzinger, 2003, 2004).

Organizational studies, including organizational communication scholarship, have also developed a rich collection of research illuminating the relations between worker identities and workplace control and resistance (Larson & Gill, 2017; Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017). Existing studies have explored the impacts of organizational control on workers' physical autonomy, commitment at work, and social identities (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kuhn et al., 2008; Nadesan, 1997).

My research contributes to these insights by revealing how organizational control also affects workers' capacity to imagine or formulate desires. Attending to workers' imagination draws attention to covert, invisible, and even hard-to-demonstrate effects of power on workers' mind and body. I view imaginations as dynamic, emergent in communicative practices rather than predetermined individual attributes. In particular, I illuminate how the spatial-temporal materiality of factory work constrained apparel production workers' imagination of alternative careers and the industry's future.

Addressing workers' constrained imagination contributes to ongoing interest in worker voice (Dutta, 2018) and workers' discursive practices to craft positive identities at work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a). A prominent line of research investigates how people negotiate occupation-related stigma, taint, and indignities. These studies revealed workers' discursive practices, including ideological reframing, recalibrating, refocusing (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), selective out-group comparison (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a), differential weighting of outsiders' views (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), and foregrounding privileged social identities (S. J. Tracy & Scott, 2006). While these studies provide insight into how workers dissociate with negative meanings in their work and craft positive ones, they assume workers' autonomy in discursive practices. In other words, it has been taken for granted



that people have the desire, tendency, and capacity to craft positive selves at work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas, 2011a). The subject positions revealed in existing studies are often flexible, choice-making, dedicated individuals (e.g., Halford & Leonard, 2006; Kuhn, 2006). By contrast, my findings reveal that while working in a stigmatized occupation, participants did not imbue positive meanings in work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), embrace its negative meanings (Cruz, 2015), or foreground different frames to resolve identity tensions (Meisenbach, 2008). Instead, participants disliked their work and also recognized their limits to escape from it. As such, I emphasize that workers' capacities for meaning-making are shaped by material and discursive conditions in and beyond work, rather than assuming workers' autonomy in engaging with discursive practices.

My analysis further addresses the stakes of production workers' constrained imagination to workplace resistance and worker agency. Participants were aware of how work and social conditions actively limited their imagination. Despite their awareness, they were often unable to push against these limits. On the one hand, they developed self-adaptivity, that is, the ability to adapt themselves to their social environments. Self-adaptivity focused on individual changes to fit in the environment rather than demanding the transformation of the environment. Therefore, self-adaptivity is a passive orientation that contributes to the reproduction of workplace and social control. On the other hand, participants waited for accidental opportunities to move out of their status quo and were motivated to help their offspring avoid manufacturing jobs. Their attitude toward manufacturing is likely to contribute to younger generations' lack of interest in manufacturing and the employment challenge in the manufacturing sector (Qian, 2020, October 15). Amidst difficulty in recruiting workers and cultivating skilled workers, Chinese apparel manufacturers face pressure to increase wages and improve working conditions, as expressed in

the opening quote by Tutu Hua in Chapter Six. Together, participants' self-adaptivity might reproduce workplace control during their tenure in apparel work, but their offspring's class mobility and alternative careers might help improve apparel work in the long run.

Further, my findings of spatial-temporal materiality offer important lessons on the constitution of materiality and its role in organizing. Materiality has long been recognized as a key concept in organizational communication scholarship (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Extant studies have illustrated that spatial features of the workplace offer cues to workers' identities; these features include its size, degree of openness, and decorative style (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cruz, 2015; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Novak, 2016; Rich, 2016). Research has also revealed that work's temporal features shape workers' perceived meaningfulness of work; these features include whether work time is shared, autonomous, punctuated, and complex (e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Kuhn, 2006; Roy, 1959; Tang & Eom, 2019). My study builds on these insights to highlight that spatial and temporal features converge to shape worker identities. More importantly, I demonstrate that spatial-temporal materiality shapes workers' imagination through communicative affordances. My approach moves beyond merely viewing space or time as providing cues or discursive resources for work identities (e.g., Kuhn, 2006; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Novak, 2016). It further moves away from a resource-centered understanding of materiality (e.g., Gist-Mackey & Dougherty, 2020; Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019). The resource-centered understanding is limited in that we tend to think of resources as things outside of our body, especially as tangible objects, estranging us from conceiving materiality as constitutive of our consciousness. Together, explicating how communicative affordances shape workers' imagination provides new insight into how materiality matters in organizing.

## **Development**

My findings also contribute to ongoing discussions on development, including scholarships on supply chains and global productions and critical studies on development discourses and beliefs. First, I advance conceptions of labor in global productions by centering workers' perspectives. There exists a rich collection of studies about global supply chains around key concepts, such as Global Commodity Chains (GCC) (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994), Global Value Chains (GVC) (Gereffi et al., 2005; Gibbon & Ponte, 2005), and Global Production Networks (Coe & Hess, 2011; Coe & Yeung, 2015). This body of literature has contributed perspectives to address the interrelatedness of production activities across multiple locations of contemporary capitalism. A glaring omission in supply chain analyses is the component of labor (Werner, 2012). Recently, scholars have begun to address the impacts of global production networks, particularly upgrading initiatives, on labor (e.g., Nathan et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that economic upgrading does not benefit all workers, especially women (S. Barrientos et al., 2011; J. Lee et al., 2016). Furthermore, studies have revealed that upgrading involves the transformation of labor's value to capital, i.e., an articulation of whose work and skills are valued (S. W. Barrientos, 2013; Werner, 2012).

I build on these insights to illuminate that upgrading involves articulating work's value and constructing regional and national hierarchies shaped by development discourses. My analysis surfaces participants' optimistic, idealized notions of upgrading, the West, and development, which imply economic centrism and political conservatism. My critical reading of practitioners' paradoxical articulations of skill challenges economic centrism by revealing potentially negative consequences of upgrading on production workers and employment in manufacturing. I further critique political conservatism as it legitimizes existing regional

hierarchies and unequal distribution of profits in supply chains. Altogether, I challenge the idealization of upgrading by juxtaposing managers' and workers' perspectives. My consideration of workers' well-being moves beyond economic concerns and includes issues of autonomy, skill, and pleasure at work.

Second, my findings contribute to critical studies on development discourses and beliefs by demonstrating that upgrading idealism constitutes a recent iteration of development idealism (DI) in China (Thornton et al., 2015; Thornton & Xie, 2016). Upgrading idealism aligns with DI in that it constructs a regional hierarchy that positions Western developed countries ahead of China and a fairly homogenous industrial development path for China to follow. Economic centrism in upgrading idealism also reflects DI's focus on economic growth as the driving force for development. Conversely, DI is updated by upgrading idealism which shows that development also involves articulations about hierarchies of industries and work processes. While technology remains a dominant theme, upgrading idealism suggests recent shifts of attention to branding and service work from industrialization, which was privileged in early development discourses (Escobar, 2012; Melkote & Steeves, 2014). Overall, my critical discursive lens challenges the idealization of upgrading, calls for more attention to social discourses that shape the value of work and opens up room for alternative imaginations of development.

### **Methodological reflections**

My research outcomes bear the impacts of my situated research positions, various contingencies, and particular methodological approaches I took. Here I further reflect on these impacts, hoping to provide lessons for future research.

### **Unfulfilled ambitions and untold stories**

My original plan for this study included a comparative element focused on American and Chinese apparel workers' imagination. However, securing a comparable pool of U.S. participants was difficult amidst the massive decline of apparel manufacturing in the U.S. I was not able to return to the U.S. to continue my recruitment after I returned to China for field research. Soon after my arrival in China, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Wuhan. Due to health risks and travel restrictions, I could not implement my fieldwork plan in China, either.

I would have built better rapport with more participants if I had conducted participant observations as planned. Chapter Two mentions that ineffective trade unionism and the lack of collective organizing among Chinese factory workers constrained my recruitment through workers' formal groups. However, research has shown factory workers may organize through religious practices (e.g., Ban, 2016; Gao & Qian, 2020). Visiting factories and staying around could have possibly given me access to more workers and their everyday living. Attending to workers' religions would have added richer accounts of workers' imagination.

In adopting an iterative approach (S. J. Tracy, 2013), my dissertation focuses on key themes that contribute new knowledge to the field of study. In highlighting these themes, I have to leave out other stories narrated by participants. For example, while many participants revealed their admiration for Western countries, a couple of participants also expressed dislike of them, such as the U.S. Pro-West and anti-West sentiments both exist among ordinary Chinese. Further research could investigate the role of anti-West sentiments in Chinese industrial practitioners' development idealism.

## **Researching manufacturing workers**

Amidst the overall low image of manufacturing, researching manufacturing workers evoked my tenuous feelings. I faced people's disbelief in my research's value. For example, a relative of mine asked me about my research topic. Upon hearing apparel manufacturing as my site, my relative commented, "Why do you study this 'sunset' industry?" Similarly, a participant who was a former sewer and apparel factory owner expressed doubt in my research on apparel manufacturing. He recommended that I research industries that generate more money and will lead our future. Their comments provide a glimpse into the general public's depreciation of apparel manufacturing and manufacturing more broadly. Amidst their doubt, I felt reassured when hearing participants' and other people's affirmation of the importance of my research.

In the process of recruitment and interviews, my background had multi-dimensional impacts. Due to my outsider status, gaining trust from participants emerged as a challenge. I overcame this challenge primarily through recruiting via personal networks. My relatives connected me to apparel workers and helped me gain their trust. I used a snowball sampling method and noticed that the weaker connections I had with an interviewee, the less likely they would recommend potential participants. It was challenging to get the snowball rolling continuously. In short, my personal relationships played a crucial role in my recruitment.

Overall, the specific constraints identified here are unique to the apparel manufacturing industry. Constraints in electronics factories and knowledge work may be different. Future research could extend the concept of bounded imagination to other manufacturing industries and other occupations through empirical studies.

### **Traversing national and cultural boundaries**

As a Chinese national pursuing a degree in the U.S., I have been witnessing people negotiating tensions and connections between the U.S. and China. My unique identity has been a catalyst for people's discussion. For example, when I conducted fieldwork in the U.S., some factory owners told me enthusiastically about their economic ties with China. Contrarily, a former factory owner complained about the Chinese government's subsidies to factories, which they believed impeded fair international trade. Also, I learned about U.S. stakeholders' concern about labor conditions in China, which was the key theme of a prominent U.S.-based NGO's annual meeting. Further research could present more nuanced accounts on economic and political ties between China and other countries, especially the U.S.

After I returned to China, my everyday experience indicates Chinese people's compounding patriotism and admiration for Western countries. Many people inquired me about what was good about the U.S. and what life looked like in the U.S. Meanwhile, people also emphasized to me the importance of patriotism explicitly and implicitly. For example, a friend of mine suspected that it would be easier to publish negative reports on China in English journals and warned me against the tendency to shame China to satisfy Western readers. My friend's comments emerged amidst Western colonial discourses that represent China as a backward country (Ban & Dutta, 2012). For another example, when I was waiting to take my driver's license exam, an officer, upon knowing my education in the U.S., began to complain about Chinese descendants who blamed China while residing in the U.S.

These examples demonstrate that I need to consider the implications for the national image when presenting my research findings. Chapter Four mentions that good research stories about impoverished communities need to illuminate social problems without blaming and

stigmatizing individuals. Moreover, good stories need to attend to the communities' needs for victory stories and hope. On top of these concerns, my research also needs to consider how my findings about Chinese workers will be interpreted by an international readership. I will keep these reflections ongoing in my future presentations of my results.

Moreover, while I illuminate the disadvantages of Chinese apparel manufacturers and Chinese workers in global productions, I am not claiming Chinese practitioners' moral superiority due to their suffering. Instead, I urge Chinese practitioners to consider their responsibilities in international relations rather than "transferring" suffering elsewhere. This is an urgent task as China is a significant player in foreign direct investment, such as in Africa (Tang & Eom, 2019). Even though my research is set in China, I hope to provide lessons for employment relations in broader scopes.

### **Reflexivity and accountability**

I have provided my reflections throughout the dissertation on my positionality, challenges, and ways to come to conclusions. As burgeoning discussions on decolonizing methodologies indicate (Parker et al., 2017; Smith, 2012), there is a need to move from reflexivity to accountability. I recognize the limitations of my reflexivity and my inadequate implementation of ideal practices of accountability, such as co-designing research and co-writing findings with participants (C. R. Hale, 2001). As a doctoral student, I was expected to demonstrate my ability to conduct research independently and contribute knowledge to my field of study by completing a dissertation. Adopting a traditional research model, I faced similar limits of ensuring accountability as factory ethnographers. For example, C. K. Lee (1998) was aware of feminist scholars' call for "breaking the asymmetrical power relationship between the researcher and the researched" and "seeking an egalitarian research process characterized by



mutuality, empathy, authenticity, and intersubjectivity” (p. 176). However, Lee was not able to live up to such expectations in her study of female factory workers in China. She wrote, “My experience in this present study illustrated more the researcher's powerlessness than her ability to reciprocate by giving assistance, resources, rights, or power to her subjects” (p. 176). What she could do is to be “an empathetic friend, with a sympathetic and patient ear” and to engage in conversation on topics of interest to the workers (p. 177). After leaving the fieldwork, Lee maintained contact with some Hong Kong workers but not with mainland Chinese workers. Similar to Lee, I also felt limited to reciprocate my research participants.

Moreover, my research demonstrates how the institutional review process has imposed challenges to realize ideals in decolonizing methodologies. For example, I was prohibited by the IRB to honor participants’ request to reveal their name, not to mention co-writing the research reports and ensuring them credits. Recognizing all these limits, I feel obligated to prepare research reports more accessible to the participants’ communities after finishing this dissertation, which they are unlikely to read. My practice of writing a poem, featured after this chapter, is part of my endeavor to present my findings in alternative ways.

### **Imagination unbound**

To refashion workers’ imagination, we need novel perspectives and creative strategies. Here, I offer some practical implications and my contemplative thoughts.

#### **Reimagine work**

From my study, I derived three aspects of practical implications. First, in terms of improving factory workers’ wellbeing, efforts can be made at multiple levels besides a fair piece rate. Providing workers with social securities, establishing a more flexible residency registration

system, and creating more opportunities for offspring education will all ease the burden of apparel workers and other migrant workers.

Second, to retain existing apparel workers and recruit younger generations, apparel factories should work on making sewing cool, such as allowing flexible training and adding in customer-interaction elements into work. I am not idealizing these strategies. I recognize each strategy may bring in new problems. Nevertheless, these strategies are necessary to transform the factories into a more humane space.

Finally, to enhance workers' solidarity, labor activists should create opportunities for distant workers to interact and collaborate. While workers may not have the economic resources to travel and meet others, online meetings are a promising opportunity with the widespread adoption of cellphones and the internet. Labor organizers could arrange online meetings/tours with translation services to connect international workers. Also, labor activists could build multilingual digital archives and platforms featuring workers' narratives through community collaboration.

### **Rework imagination**

From a radical perspective, I call for a manifesto on “the right to imagine.” Like the right of land and the right to the city, imagination is also a human right. I acknowledge there is a long way to go before we recognize and protect our right to imagine. Slave labor is not a far history. Child labor, forced labor, human trafficking, hunger, and extreme poverty are enduring problems in our society. We are still challenged by meeting basic human needs and ensuring adequate employment opportunities. Yet, embracing the right to imagine might prompt us to rethink our goals in humanitarian aids, labor rights protection, and development, thus kindling new paths towards equality and emancipation.

## A POEM: MY HEART, MY MIND

Bade farewell to my village while young<sup>20</sup>

Exploring the big city all alone

Entering the factory not for fun

Feeling little on the assembly line

Being assigned a single operation

Since then

    Laboring day and night

    Under a low piece rate

    Being sedentary with little movement

    My neck and back hurt

    But I can't rest

    I got a family to support

    I'd better swallow my complaint

    Tears don't bring payment

    My stomach still empty

    My siblings expecting tuition money

    I got to pull them out of poverty

    For their future I thread

---

<sup>20</sup> I wrote this poem based on workers' narratives featured in Chapter Five to highlight apparel production workers' work experiences and thank them for sharing their stories.

Up up the speed

Despite pains in the period

Give me the all-attendance reward

Endeavoring outside for a decade

Missing my mountains and my land

Drawing back my wondering mind

Focusing on tasks at my hand

Oops, my eye hurt by broken needles

Continuing work with no leaves

I can't take breaks

I shall work till I can't see

Till my children get their degrees

When that day comes

Wrinkles around my eyes

Smile on my face

I kept my promise

Time to say goodbye to this place

That narrowed my mind and stole my dreams

Not all is worth

But a life without choice

Persist, persist

With faith from my loving heart

It's finally time to exit

For those can't yet quit

I shall lend them my support

Because I know what suffering meant

I am no longer young

Realizing I am not alone

Like twinkling stars in the evening

Coming together we can brightly shine

**APPENDIX 1: CLARIFICATIONS ON TRANSLATED TERMS**

	<b>Chinese Pinyin</b>	<b>Chinese Characters</b>	<b>English Translations</b>	<b>Illustrations</b>
Work-related terms	<i>dagong</i>	打工	Work for a boss; working for others	Emphasis on workers' subjugated or passive position in the employment relationship; lack of a sense of ownership
	<i>gongzuo</i>	工作	Work	A general term for work
	<i>shangban</i>	上班	Go to work; start to work	It implies that one works for others as one needs to leave their home and/or start work at a certain time.
	<i>chuangye</i>	创业	Start a business	It is connected to entrepreneurialism, in contrast to "dagong."
	<i>jiaban</i>	加班	Work overtime	
	<i>ganhuo</i>	赶货	Rush an order	"Gan" means "rush;" "huo" means "products, orders"
Worker-related terms	<i>dagongde</i>	打工的	People who work for a boss	
	<i>yuangong</i>	员工	Employee	
	<i>gongren</i>	工人	Production worker	
	<i>congyezhe</i>	从业者	Practitioner	Including workers, managers, and owners.
	<i>laobaixing</i>	老百姓	Ordinary folks	
Manager-related terms	<i>shifu</i>	师傅	Master; teacher	Who teaches and oversees ordinary production workers
	<i>zuzhang</i>	组长	Line leader; group leader	Head of a workgroup
	<i>zhuguan</i>	主管	Director	Head of a department
	<i>zhuren</i>	主任	Director	Head of a department
	<i>jingli</i>	经理	Manager	Head of a department
	<i>changzhang</i>	厂长	Top manager	Who oversees the whole production processes
	<i>gaoguan</i>	高管	Executive	"Gao" means "high;" "guan" means "manage, govern, rule."

	<i>laoban</i>	老板	Boss	Who has ownership; a colloquial term
	<i>qiyejia</i>	企业家	Entrepreneur	Owners of a large corporation; a formal term
	<i>suoyouzhe</i>	所有者	Owner	A formal term rarely used by participants
	<i>lingdao</i>	领导	Leader	“Lingdao” means “to guide.” In contradiction to “qunzhong” (ordinary folks, 群众); used in collective-owned enterprises or in governments
Compensation-related terms	<i>gongzi</i>	工资	Wages	Monetary gains; typically refer to monthly income
	<i>daiyu</i>	待遇	Compensation	Broader than monetary gains; include benefits
	<i>shouru</i>	收入	Income	Inclusive wages, bonuses, and subsidies
	<i>fuli</i>	福利	benefits	Including social securities, gifts on holidays
	<i>jiangjin</i>	奖金	Bonus	Monetary gains as rewards
	<i>butie</i>	补贴	Subsidy	Paid to workers for meals, lodging, transportation, and other miscellaneous expenses
	<i>gongjia</i>	工价	Work price	A piece rate
	<i>danjia</i>	单价	Unit price	A piece rate
Conditions	<i>tiaojian</i>	条件	Condition	A general term
	<i>huanjing</i>	环境	Environment; circumstances	Emphasis on physical, objective conditions
Apparel manufacturing-related terms	<i>zhiyi</i>	制衣	Making apparel; making garments	Formal
	<i>zhuoyifu</i>	做衣服	Making garments	Informal, colloquial
	<i>zhiyichang</i>	制衣厂	Apparel factory, garment factory	A conventional expression
	<i>fuzhuang</i>	服装	Apparel, garment	Formal

	<i>yifu</i>	衣服	Clothes; garment	Less formal
	<i>jiagong</i>	加工	Process	Cut & sew
	<i>Jiagongchang</i>	加工厂	Process facilities	Cut & sew facilities
Industry- related terms	<i>hangye</i>	行业	Industry; sector	
	<i>shiyè</i>	事业	Career	
	<i>zhuanhàng</i>	转行	Start a career in another industry; enter into another industry	“Zhuan” means change and transfer; “hang” means industry or sector.
Work ethics- related terms	<i>xinku</i>	辛苦	Laborious, tough, tiring	“Ku” means bitterness, or hardship.
	<i>chiku</i>	吃苦	Hardworking	A colloquial term; “ <i>chi</i> ” means “eat”; “ <i>ku</i> ” means bitterness, hardship
	<i>chikunailao</i>	吃苦耐劳	Hardworking	More formal than “ <i>chiku</i> ”
	<i>qinlao</i>	勤劳	Hardworking	A formal term



## APPENDIX 2: RECRUITMENT NOTICE (CHINESE)

### 招募制衣厂从业者作为研究对象

我正在收集制衣厂从业者的故事。

我叫姜静，是美国北卡罗来纳大学教堂山分校的博士研究生。我正在为博士毕业论文招募受访者\*，访谈约一个小时，是轻松非正式的聊天。访谈内容包括工作经历、工作感受以及对同行的认知等。

如不能面谈，访谈则可通过电话或网络会话进行。我会严格保密受访者的个人身份，遵循参与自愿的原则。采访结束后，受访者可以选择参加日记写作，根据自己的时间安排灵活记录自己的工作感悟。如有疑问，欢迎与我联系。

受访者需要在 18 岁以上，能够使用普通话或者英语交流，目前或曾经在制衣厂工作，工作岗位包括但不限于组织管理、市场营销、生产制造和售后服务。衣服品种不限，包括 T 恤、毛衣、外套、裤子等。工厂规模和所有权不限。条件所限，我无法给受访者提供报酬，但希望能够记录和讲述制衣厂从业者的故事。研究结束后，欢迎大家向我索取研究总结。

非常期待您跟我分享您的故事。您可以通过以下任何方式联系我。

电话/短信: [Omitted in the appendix]

邮箱: [jjiang2@live.unc.edu](mailto:jjiang2@live.unc.edu)

微信号: [Omitted in the appendix]

希望大家帮我扩散招募公告、提供招募线索。

感谢您的支持!

\*该研究通过了北卡大学的伦理审查，审查批号为 18-2847。

本人在北卡罗来纳大学教堂山分校官网的个人页面链接 [Screenshot omitted in the appendix]: <https://comm.unc.edu/people/department-graduate-students-2/jing-jiang/>

## APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

### Protocol for employees-simplified

访谈提纲：适用于制衣厂一线从业者

/Interview protocol: for front-line practitioners in apparel factories

开场白/opening notes

【背景信息】/background information 【家庭背景】/family background

I. 工作经历/work history

II. 工作细节 【谈谈目前所在的厂，最近工作的厂或记忆最深刻的厂】/work details (discuss your current factory, most recent factory, or most memorable factory)

【工厂概况】/general features of the factory

【工作时间】/work time

【工资待遇】/wages and compensation

【工作环境】/work environment

【工友关系】/coworker relationship

【工作技能】/work skill

III. 感受/评价/feelings/evaluations

VI. 社会联系/social connections

【形象认知】/perceptions of images

【关系认知】/perceptions of relationship

【制衣业变化】/changes in apparel manufacturing

V. 想象-互动 /imagination-interaction

结语 /concluding notes

## Protocol for owners-simplified

访谈提纲：适用于制衣厂所有者  
/Interview protocol: for apparel factory owners

开场白/opening note

【背景信息】/background information

【家庭背景】/family background

I. 创业履历/History of starting the business

【员工概况】/employee overview

【工作时间】/work time

【工资待遇】/wages and compensation

【工作环境】/work environment

【工友关系】/coworker relationship

【互相评价】/mutual evaluations

II. 感受和挑战/feelings/challenges

【挑战】/challenges

【事业评价】/job appraisals

III. 产业变化/industrial changes

【环境变化】/environmental changes

【未来挑战】/future challenges

【工厂搬迁】/factory relocation

VI. 社会联系/social connections

【形象认知】 /perceptions of images

【关系认知】 /perceptions of relationship

V. 想象-互动 /imagination-interaction

结语 /concluding notes

## APPENDIX 4: LIST OF RESEARCH MEMOS

Maintaining a range of memos played an important role in my completion of the dissertation. These memos helped me track different research processes, provided materials for my reflections, and assisted with my emotion management. To inspire future dissertation writers, I listed my memos as follows.

- Recruitment Memo: 1) contacts for potential interviewees; 2) sample recruitment letters; 3) date of time of recruitment initiatives; and 4) responses obtained from potential subjects.
- Interview Memo: 1) research process (e.g., preparation, feeling, obstacles, opportunities); 2) information gathered but not recorded during the interview; 3) interesting observations and findings; 4) cross-examinations of interviews; 5) to-do items for following interviews; and 6) reflections on research in general.
- Transcription Memo: date, time, and methods of transcription; interviews to be transcribed.
- Coding and Translation Memo: thought processes and challenges in coding and translation.
- Writing Memo: writing goals, daily accomplishments, stuck points, inspirations, and reflections.

Venting memo: challenges in the graduate career and life in general; to relieve stress by venting anxieties, frustrations, and depressions.

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