Other Caregiving and Other Activism:

Foregrounding Women Behind Black Lung Patients

by

Yanping Ni

Department of East Asian Studies
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

____
Ralph Litzinger, Advisor

____
Nicole Barnes

____
Prasenjit Duara

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of
Asian/Pacific Studies Institute in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2021

ABSTRACT

Other Caregiving and Other Activism:
Foregrounding Women Behind Black Lung Patients

by

Yanping Ni

Department of East Asian Studies
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

____
Ralph Litzinger, Advisor

____
Nicole Barnes

____
Prasenjit Duara

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in the Department of
Asian/Pacific Studies Institute in the Graduate School of
Duke University

2021

Copyright by
Yanping Ni
2021

Abstract

This ethnographic study looks at women caregivers in pneumoconiosis (also known as black lung) patients' families in rural China. Based on archival research and ten months of digital fieldwork, this thesis argues that the family is a crucial space to examine for thoroughly understanding black lung, a disease that has sickened more workers in China than any other disease and encapsulates the ugliness of China's miraculous economic development. An analysis of China's social reforms over the past decades reveals the state's strategy to push sickened workers back to the family unit, and close narratives of two women's daily lives in caregiving illustrate the complex impact caused by the incurable black lung as well as the creative responses initiated by suffering people in desperate situations.

Dedication

To workers and those who care for/about them.

Contents

Abstract iv

Acknowledgements vii

1. Foregrounding Women 1

2. Disposable Bodies, Privatized Care 28

    Overturning the State's Rhetoric 32

    "World Governed by Scoundrels" 43

    Under Privatization: Bodies, Care, and Family 51

3. Displaced Care 65

    Two Families, Split Caregiver 68

    Happy Nanny There, Care Drain Here 81

4. Radicalized Care 92

    Chain of Burdens 94

    "Now I know the Rules" 100

    "You Would Be a Revolutionary" 108

Epilogue: Episodes of Solidarity 119

Appendix A: Distribution of Coal Resources in Shanxi 126

Works Cited 127

Acknowledgements

I thank my interlocutors for sparing their precious time, for generously sharing their life stories, for inviting me into their homes via video chats, for genuinely revealing their emotions, for allowing me to be a semi-daughter in their families, for bearing with my emotional personality, for sending me caring messages, for confirming details for me with great patience, and for many other things. My deepest gratitude goes to Liu, Cao, Yun, and Mei, whose stories are told in detail in this work.

I thank my advisor, Professor Ralph Litzinger, without whom I would not have known about black lung disease, developed a keen interest in medical issues, or gradually solidified my passion for an anthropological career. I thank Professor Nicole Barnes, who has never failed to offer me constructive advice and encouragement. She has helped me find my confidence as a junior scholar, a woman of color, and a member of the Chinese diaspora. Taking an independent study with her is one of the best decisions I have made at Duke. I thank Professor Prasenjit Duara, who has shown me the allure of archives and the intriguing world of history. Without his inspiration, I would not have come to explore the history of the Chinese mining industry.

I thank Professor Diane Nelson, the most dedicated teacher and the most creative anthropologist. Thinking back to her theory and fieldwork classes can always revive my belief in anthropology, even when it is obscured by various internal and external forces. I thank Professor Kearsley Stewart, my best mentor and dear friend.

I thank my friends who lift me up on gloomy days. Thank you Zenghui, Sujie, and Yue. I owe you many hotpots that I will pay back in our beautiful days waiting ahead.

I thank my parents for "throwing" me into a textile factory for most of my childhood, which in turn nourished my sensitivity to labor and injustice that are key to this work, and for supporting my academic interests from journalism to film to anthropology, even if they have barely understood my mysterious trajectory. I thank my grandma, the person I love most in this world.

I thank Duke, where I started learning how to read history and theory. I thank every tree, flower, bird, squirrel, and other being on campus. Therein hides the secret of healing. I thank all the essential workers who have sustained our lives and made a favorable environment for academic research possible in this exceptional situation.

1. Foregrounding Women

> "We met each other at the mines. He was a miner, and I was a vendor. I carried cigarettes, snacks and drinks into the mountains and sold them to miners there. I was only 19. I fell in love with him immediately. One year later we got married."
>
> "I go back there often in my dreams. The path to the mines is steep and narrow. On one side it is mountain. On the other side it is formidable abyss. The horse is following me, with heavy loads carried on its back. I have to keep walking, walking like crazy. The horse does not understand my language (*ma shi tingbudong renhua de* 马是听不懂人话的). What if it knocks me off the cliff?"
>
> "I was on the brink of breakdown. I wanted to end it all…there is a river next to our house. I wanted to jump into the river. I was a person. I needed to be understood. Then I thought of my children…they were only 11, 12 years old. I could not…"[1]

It is not common to hear these voices from women in the existing narratives on black lung. As a disease that often plagues male-dominant industries like mining and urban construction, most stories on black lung place male patients in the center and narrate events from their perspectives, leaving women in the background. If women do come into view, they are positioned on the side, passively. Women's images are to be drawn according to men's statuses. If men pass away, women become widows and bereaved mothers.[2] If men are well taken care of, women are good wives who embrace

[1] These monologues are selected from my interviews.
[2] See, for example, *Shuangxi de yanlei* 双喜的眼泪 [Tears in Shuangxi], directed by Fan Jiaju 范家驹 (2010), Film. It tells stories about a "village of widows" (*guafu cun* 寡妇村), which is a common narrative on women who are left behind by their male relatives who died of black lung. For "villages of widows" as a result of black lung, see also Chun Dai 戴春, "Ming ruo chenai: Hunan chenfeibing diaocha jishi houxu" 命若尘埃: 湖

traditional morals and marital obligations.[3] If men are courageous activists, women are their most loyal supporters.[4] If men are left behind or divorced, women are more or less thought of as disappointing. There are women behind black lung patients. Their names are often not mentioned; instead as they are referred to as men's wives, mothers, or sisters.

In stark contrast to these marginal(ized) representations, women in reality shoulder the majority of responsibilities once the disease strikes their families. Since the disease takes away their husbands' labor capacity, women's work and roles are at once doubled. Those who were once housewives must leave the home to become breadwinners, while their domestic and care work becomes their "second shift" after

---

南尘肺病调查纪实后续 [Life like Dust: Follow-up of Pneumoconiosis Investigation in Hunan], *Zhongguo gongren* 中国工人 [Chinese Workers] 7 (2013): 4–14.

[3] See, for example, *Kuangming, mafu, chenfeibing* 矿民, 马夫, 尘肺病 [Miners, the Horsekeeper and Pneumoconiosis], directed by Jiang Nengjie 蒋能杰 (2019), Film. The first half of the film documents work life at the mine sites. The second half focuses on the story of a family. The husband was sickened with black lung and later passed away (it took ten years to film). The wife has a mental disability, although she could handle most domestic work. The two children are in middle school and have yet to work to support the family. In our interviews, the director Jiang said that the wife really loved and cared about her husband. But, curiously, these expressions by the wife are not visible in the film. She is always in the background and not seen to speak much. For more stories on how wives support their families afflicted by black lung, see Yuhua Guo 郭于华, Xiaomian Wu 吴小沔, and Mingxun Zhao 赵茗煦, *Chenfeibing nongmingong koushu jilu* 尘肺病农民工口述记录 [The Oral Accounts of Migrant Workers with Black Lung] (Beijing: Intellectual Property Publishing House, 2020).

[4] See, for example, *Chen* 尘 [Dust], directed by Zhu Rikun 朱日坤 (2014), Film. The film documents the stories of several worker activists who attempt to defend their rights and request compensation via legal tools. Women occasionally show up in the film, as supporters of these workers. Read more about this film, "Award winning Chinese documentary filmmaker Zhu Rikun presents his film 'Chen' at Florence's Festival dei Popoli December 4-5," *La Pietra Dialogues, New York University*, November 28, 2014, http://www.lapietradialogues.org/blog/?p=3712#more-3712.

returning from the workplace.[5] In other cases, they are in the fields, farming the land, and feeding the livestock. They are also on the street, expressing their anger and shouting out their appeals, on behalf of their men with blackened lungs. In rural China, where most families still follow traditional gender roles and divisions ("men manage the outside, women manage the inside"; *nanzhuwai, nvzhunei* 男主外, 女主内),[6] they are at once both the men and the women in their families. Challenges in these women's lives are occasionally recognized. Love Save Pneumoconiosis (*da'ai qingchen* 大爱清尘)—the most well-known NGO that aims to assist black lung patients in China—notes these women's multiple duties as caregivers, laborers, and informal workers, yet even this recognition has been condensed into only a few lines of summary.[7] What is taking place in these women's everyday lives? How do various burdens and responsibilities translate into their lived experiences? For women with limited medical knowledge and work experience, what does it mean to take care of someone sickened with the incurable black lung and to step out of their households for job opportunities? How do we understand

---

[5] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking Adult, 1989).

[6] Erin Elizabeth Thomason, "Obliged to Care: Rural Chinese Families, Migration, and the Changing Intergenerational Contract" (PhD diss., University of California: Los Angeles, 2017). Also see Susan Mann, "Work and Household in Chinese Culture: Historical Perspectives," in *Re-drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China*, ed. Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[7] "Zhongguo chenfeibing nongmin shengcun zhuangkuang diaocha baogao" 中国尘肺病农民工生存状况调查报告 [Report on the Living Conditions of Migrant Workers with Black Lung 2016], *China Social Assistance Foundation Love Save Pneumoconiosis* 中华社会救助基金会大爱清尘基金, last modified 2016, https://www.daqc.org.cn/public/uploads/35/1_20171106191151_j5d8g.pdf.

women's subjectivities through these narratives and tell the stories from their perspectives? It was these questions, as well as my desire to address the asymmetry between the representation and reality of women in narratives on black lung, that drew me to this thesis project. My findings from conversations with women in black lung patients' families have proven fruitful. As synthesized below, this work broadens the existing narratives on black lung disease by focusing on the family—as well as its politics and discourses—as the main site of care for black lung patients. Additionally, it contributes to the existing debates on suffering as anthropological inquiry and the rising theoretical wave of "*critical* socialist feminism" among Chinese scholars in recent years. Ultimately, this is an ethnographic work that pays close attention to and reflects upon the key concept of care, which, hopefully, manifests as an act of care in itself.

The disease of black lung, certainly, is associated with complex issues. Officially termed "pneumoconiosis," it is an "occupational" disease that has sickened more workers in China than any other disease. In this work I use the word "occupational" in an ironic sense by placing it in quotation marks. Black lung is a disease that workers get from their occupations, but the term "occupational" (*zhiye* 职业) has been deployed by Chinese state institutions to purposely conceals the exploitative nature of the industries

and the state's complicity in this process.[8] The disease frequently afflicts workers in industries like mining and urban construction, resulting from years of dust accumulation in workers' lungs. By the end of 2018, there were around 873,000 cases of black lung (not including undiagnosed cases), accounting for approximately 90% of the occupational disease cases in China.[9] One unauthorized estimation even claims the number of patients is as large as six million throughout the country.[10] Once sickened with black lung, patients suffer from shortness of breath, fatigue, fever, cough, chest pain, and so forth. The disease has three stages. Yet, because Stage I often shows only mild symptoms that could be easily confused with a normal cold, most workers do not get diagnosed until they are already in Stage III, or at best Stage II. In later stages, patients need ventilators to breathe. The disease may also cause complications like pleurisy. There is no cure for black lung. Patients may choose surgeries like lung lavage or lung transplant, or use more conservative treatments (e.g., take medicine). The

---

[8] Ralph Litzinger, Zoom meeting with author, February 18, 2021.

[9] "Jiankangbao: Shi buwei lianshou zhan chenfei, xishu yao chu naxie zhao" 健康报: 十部委联手站尘肺, 细数要出哪些招 [Ten Ministries and Commissions Join Forces to Fight Pneumoconiosis], *Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention* 中国疾病预防控制中心, last modified July 22, 2019, http://www.chinacdc.cn/mtbd_8067/201907/t20190722_204195.html. This figure only includes confirmed black lung cases; patients who are still struggling to obtain official medical reports are not counted. It is not easy for patients to receive recognized diagnostic reports. Each province has only a few stations (usually the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the capital city of the province) that are authorized to release these reports. Some authorized institutions may refuse to sign the reports because an official report could enable the patient to demand compensation. Patients sometimes have to submit to mutilation to obtain that single document.

[10] Yuhua Guo 郭于华, Xiaomian Wu 吴小沔, and Mingxun Zhao 赵茗煦, *Chenfeibing nongmingong koushu jilu* 尘肺病农民工口述记录 [The Oral Accounts of Migrant Workers with Black Lung] (Beijing: Intellectual Property Publishing House, 2020).

chronicity of the disease means endless treatment expenses and an uncertain future. Prolonging the life span and slowing down the process of the disease eating the lungs is the only thing patients and their families can do.

The clinical aspects of black lung should by no means cover up its deep historical and political implications. Today's large number of black lung cases is, in essence, a consequence of the privatization and capitalization of the Chinese economy over the past several decades. A more complete account of its causes requires looking back to the crucial year of 1978, the start of the "reform and opening" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) period.[11] Deng Xiaoping, celebrated as the leading figure in the economic reforms, famously stated that, "development is the only paramount force" (*fazhan caishi ying daoli* 发展才是硬道理); embedded in this quote is the argument that economic development takes priority over environmental and human health. Following this logic, the ensuing increases in production across various industries were compromised in significant ways by lax legislation, chaotic management, and poor working conditions. Lack of protection and poor workplace conditions made workers vulnerable to the concentrated dust; loose regulations on labor contracts made legal proof of the employment relationship—which is vital for compensation—almost impossible to obtain. Unlike the acute effects of

---

[11] Deng Xiaoping's proposition of "reform and opening" (g*aige kaifang* 改革开放) gradually took shape in the year 1978 in a variety of contexts and finally got passed as the state-level guideline at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee (*shiyi jie sanzhong quanhui* 十一届三中全会). Thus, in this work, I take the year 1978 as the start of the "reform and opening" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) period. I also consider that it has continued to date. The term will be shortened to "reform period" in the rest of this work.

explosions at mine sites, black lung is a chronic health condition that takes years to develop. In most cases, even when workers have been diagnosed with black lung, it is difficult for them to trace their past employers in order to prove their occupation. Since, in clinical terms, black lung results from years of engagement in dust-intensive jobs, it is easily categorized as an occupational disease and therefore warrants compensation.[12] Yet, this self-evident fact has not resulted in widespread recognition due to the complicated restrictions on compensation release, which are amplified by the formidable process of obtaining an official diagnosis report and proof of employment. All of these obstacles further burden black lung patients' weakening bodies and intensify their financial difficulties, leaving most patients with no treatment to date.

Pain is one side of the story; the ongoing daily struggle forms the other. This can be seen in one individual's desperate act of "self-mutilation" when faced with the intractable dilemma caused by black lung. In 2009, Zhang Haichao, after numerous attempts to get a correct diagnosis report in various government offices, chose literal open-chest surgery to display the accumulation of dust in his lungs,[13] and thus to prove

---

[12] For one pulmonologist's view on how black lung undoubtedly derives from one's work (and thus deserves compensation), see Guijie Li, "Renda daibiao Chen Jingyu: Zhendui chenfeibing nongmingong ying jianli biyao de jiuzhu baozhang" 人大代表陈静瑜: 针对尘肺病农民工应建立必要的救助保障 [NPC Deputy Chen Jingyu: Assistance Has to be Built for Black Lung Migrant Workers], last modified March 2, 2021, http://news.cyol.com/app/2021-03/02/content_18960365.htm.

[13] Normally, the diagnosis of black lung requires only a chest x-ray. But the x-ray test Zhang received from his local officials insisted that Zhang was sickened with tuberculosis rather than black lung, which was probably purposeful misdiagnosis to evade responsibilities. To show his blackened lungs more vividly and irrefutably, Zhang received an "Open-Chest" surgery in the First Affiliated Hospital of Zhengzhou

that he was sickened with black lung rather than another lung disease like tuberculosis.[14] This sensational "open the chest and check the lung" (*kaixiong yanfei* 开胸验肺) event, after attracting much attention from the media and the public, eventually forced the local government to pay Zhang a formidable sum in compensation (RMB 1,200,000).[15] Zhang's courageous, desperate act of self-mutilation has inspired workers around the country. Many of my interlocutors, who do not know Zhang in person, expressed much appreciation for his actions, pointing out that it was the first time that black lung as a socially, historically caused disease had come into the sight of the general public. The past few years have also seen the rise of collective actions and protests. Patients gather in front of their county or city governments, appealing for compensation and justice. Poorly educated workers teach themselves labor laws and regulations or try to hire lawyers to speak for them, in an attempt to bring their local government officials to the

---

University. When the doctor began the procedure, she made a 10 cm incision in his chest and then uses a rib spreader to expand the chest to 4-5 cm. She then took a piece of tissue to be biopsied. For more details, see Ralph Litzinger and Yanping Ni, "Zhang Haichao's 'Open-Chest Case'," in *Landscapes of Chinese Labour: A History of China's Working Class*, ed. Ivan Franceschini, Kevin Lin, Nicholas Loubere, and Christian Sorace [under review].

[14] For more details about Zhang's experience, see Wing-Chung Ho, *Occupational Health and Social Estrangement in China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 3–6.

[15] In 2009, Zhang claimed that he had received RMB 615,000. However, in 2013, after he received a lung transplant, Zhang confessed that he had actually received RMB 1,200,000. He did not give accurate information per a requirement from the local government, which was concerned that other black lung patients would ask for the same amount of compensation. In reality, while Zhang's event did draw much attention nationwide, it did not promote robust assistance plans for all patients. After Zhang, patients' path to compensation has still been full of obstacles.

table and negotiate on legal grounds. These actions are about workers' activism as well as "rightful resistance."[16] Most of these protests are silenced, but one successful attempt can be enough to encourage other workers. In addition, patients from different parts of the country are connected via digital technology. Online chat groups have been established, in which patients share treatment experiences, offer medical suggestions, mourn their departed fellows, and, more crucially, help each other remotely in the daunting process of seeking compensation. Like Zhang, many of those who have successfully received compensation have now turned into activists and legal advisors for their peers.

Admittedly, for a disease like black lung, critiques of the state and neoliberal capitalism have been crucial, and recognition of solidarity and mutual assistance inspiring. Yet, one key question that has continuously troubled me is this: Why are the existing narratives so centered on patients as *individuals* struggling with black lung, when we are looking at rural China where *family* is the basic unit of social activities, and at a chronic disease that mostly relies on family care? Curiously, the family is nearly absent, and the chronicity of the disease is overshadowed by the acute conflicts between the state and workers. That said, reducing the invisibility of certain issues and groups of people often risks rendering other groups behind them completely invisible. This may,

---

[16] For "rightful resistance," see Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance," *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 31–55; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

further, risk missing a significant piece of the story. In this thesis, I examine black lung by taking the family as the key space where the impact of the disease unfolds. I listen to and re-present stories from the perspectives of women who take on most responsibilities for their sick husbands as well as for the family as a whole. In revealing their struggles and efforts that have remained invisible or marginal in mainstream narratives, I aim to expand the analytical scope of a chronic, "occupational" disease like black lung.

So, why, specifically, do we need to step back and look at the patients' lives within the household? How will a focus on the family and stories told from women's perspectives add to the existing studies on black lung and beyond? This approach allows us to ask new questions in at least three areas. First, as mentioned, most black lung patients are taken care of by their family members (most often their wives), due to a lack of access to professional treatment in a hospital setting. Looking into caregiving in this context will facilitate our understanding of the relationship between care and scarcity. When the husband retreats to his family with a severe, incurable disease and the family's stable source of income is cut off, how does his wife manage the situation? How does she balance care work at home and wage work on the outside? Where is the space for her striving and creativity? Second, in most cases, the invasion of black lung causes not only short-term burdens but long-term effects, directly or indirectly. In a family with a sick father and an overly occupied mother, how might the transforming internal dynamics affect the next generations? Most families affected by black lung have

to give up their opportunities for social/class mobility (which occurs mostly through education), as most other needs must yield to the urgent demands of medical expenses. Children drop out of school early and likely have to work in informal, unprotected industries as their fathers once did. Third, all of these effects caused by black lung take place alongside ongoing social transformations. How do these overdetermined experiences, these burdens carried from the past, transform each family member as he/she navigates a new age? One may give up in a sea of despair. One may, yet, grow radicalized and fight back. These questions will be addressed in the main chapters in this thesis, through detailed narratives of black lung patients' and caregivers' daily lives. My narration and analysis can hardly exhaust these complex, interlinked questions on family care, intergenerational relationships, and transforming subjects through different times, given the enormity of the issues around black lung. Nevertheless, I hope this work illustrates that black lung disease has dramatic, long-term impacts on families (rather than merely on individuals) and that, in addition to protests initiated by worker activists, diverse forms of remedy and resistance are employed by women (despite new challenges being posed). Such understandings, ultimately, refresh how we think about and respond to ordinary people's suffering and strivings.

Two threads of theoretical debate have been crucial in helping me to develop this thesis project. The first one, broadly speaking, centers on what themes to look for in our

field sites and how to learn about our interlocutors within the discipline of anthropology. In 1991, Michel-Rolph Trouillot noted a deadlock that had haunted the discipline during the last few decades of the twentieth century, in which the "savage slot" was maintained as the focus of study as a result of the western imagination of the Other and the utopia.[17] To reform this historical heritage, Trouillot described the solution as "to confront and change the thematic field itself and claim new grounds for anthropology."[18] This task was later picked up by Joel Robbins, who names "the suffering slot" as the "new grounds" demanded by Trouillot as well as a shift in anthropological concerns.[19] Robbins, further, advocates thinking beyond suffering subjects and devises "an anthropology of the good," in which he calls for attention to, for example, value, morality, care, and hope.[20] These good themes, Robbins laments, are lost when anthropologists look at their fields with an excessive focus on the suffering in everyday life.

Sherry Ortner, following this thread of discussion, examines the thematic shift of scholarly inquiry through a genealogy of theories on "the dark" and alternatively coins

---

[17] Michel-Rolf Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (1991; repr., New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
[18] Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 25.
[19] Joel Robbins, "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Towards an Anthropology of the Good," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): 447–462.
[20] Robins lists three groups of themes to be studied for "an anthropology of the good." The first group includes value, morality, and well-being, the second group empathy, care, and the gift, and the third group time, change, and hope.

the term “dark anthropology.”[21] Ortner notes the tendency among anthropologists to use “the dark Marx” and “the dark Foucault.”[22] Yet, instead of understanding the question of what (and whom) to study as relevant to the theoretical and ideological impasse, Ortner ties it closely to its historical conditions. Ortner sees the emergence of studies that focus on the dark side of society as corresponding to the rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s. She also considers the term “dark anthropology” as a form of supersession of Robbins’ standpoint, a manner of inquiry that maintains studies on good themes but also merges “the good” into the dark side of narratives. As Ortner emphasizes, “rather than positing an oppositional relationship between the two, it will be useful here to look at work that attempts to integrate them.”[23] Ralph Litzinger makes a similar gesture against the binary separation between the good and the dark.[24] Litzinger “argue[s] both with and against Robbins,” because, using his research as an example, both the suffering (from the dark) and the striving (for the good) of black lung patients need to be identified and documented.[25]

The observations in this thesis have enormously benefited from these existing discussions. I envision it as a piece of work that integrates the good and the dark, in

---

[21] Sherry Ortner, “Dark Anthropology and its Others: Theory since the Eighties,” *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 1 (2016): 47–73.
[22] Ortner, “Dark Anthropology.”
[23] Ortner, “Dark Anthropology,” 60.
[24] Ralph Litzinger, “The Afterlives of the Long 1980s: Thoughts toward an Ethnography of Dust.” Paper presented at the 能 Capacity/ Energy Conference, Columbia University, October 2019.
[25] Litzinger, “The Afterlives of the Long 1980s.”

Ortner's words. In line with the "dark anthropology" situated in a time when neoliberalism rose to dominance around the globe, the dark experiences and memories of the dust-intensive industries narrated by my interlocutors can be considered consequences of China's privatizing and marketizing political economy since the reform period. Black lung patients have been sufferers, as is clear now, subjected to the neo-liberal economy and the state apparatus. In the past, they were protected neither by their employers nor state regulations. At present, the group, along with their appeals for compensation, has been largely marginalized in Chinese society. Over the past decades, these workers have been positioned in what Neferti X. M. Tadiar calls "zones of disposability," in which they are treated as "the expended, surplused populations figured as forms of bare life, at-risk populations, warehoused, disposable people."[26] As long as there are enough disposable lives, or, in Karl Marx's terms, labor that can be placed in the "industrial reserve army,"[27] the state is likely to maintain these "zones of disposability" to ensure harvests of surplus labor and capital can continue into the future. The state's indifference to and impotency regarding black lung patients' current situation is evidenced by the fact that frequent proposals for saving black lung patients submitted to the "two sessions" (*lianghui* 两会) in recent years have seldom led to

---

[26] Neferti X. M. Tadiar, "Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (115) (2013): 19–48.

[27] Karl Marx, "Progressive Production of a Relative Surplus-Population or Industrial Reserve Army," in *The Marx-Engel Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972), 422.

substantial actions.[28] This thesis argues that, first of all, it is very important to investigate those social, political, and historical conditions that have caused black lung patients' current dilemma—sickened at their workplaces (and to some extent for the state's economic development) yet pushed back to their families without receiving any form of assistance. Thus, chapter 2 is devoted to narratives of suffering, situated in the broad industrial and social transformations in Chinese history.

Having acknowledged the enormous suffering in black lung patients' personal histories and current lives, the following chapters move on to "an anthropology of the good." The focus will be on *care*, coincidentally echoing one of the "good themes" raised by Robbins. Yet, I also hope to note that the dark and the good are not separate from each other, to which both Ortner and Litzinger allude. In my research, the relationship between the two sides is intricate and nuanced, meaning that the good and the dark can intertwine. For example, the space of family, as opposed to the exploitative, necro-political economy, is viewed by my interlocutors as a shelter to which they can return to for care and protection. It is, however, at once also the basic unit of governance subjected to state policies. Husbands' expressions of gratitude for their wives manifest

---

[28] "Two sessions" refers to the National People's Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, annual plenary sessions in which national-level political decisions are made. People who have submitted proposals that appeal for assistance for black lung include Yan Huiying and Chen Jingyu. Although the central government issued the "Action Plan for Prevention and Treatment of Pneumoconiosis" (*chenfeibing fangzhi gongjian xingdong fangan* 尘肺病防治攻坚行动方案) in 2019, the terms are not clear enough on, for example, who is included and what specific assistance patients can enjoy. As a result, its implementation by local governments has not been very effective.

as actions of care, but may also be a form of coercion that ends up binding the wives more closely to their obligations. That said, the dark and the good are always incorporated into each other. While I see care in the household as a form of mediation for black lung patients' suffering, I would reject any romanticization of family care and love, let alone burdens laid upon women's shoulders. In other cases, the dark may generate the good, yet end up drawing the subjects into darker spheres: Mei, in chapter 3, finds happiness and hope in her work taking care of another family, but this job also leads to a care drain in her own family and may end up drowning her, deep in the invisible, unprotected labor sector. Yun, in chapter 4, forced by the intractable difficulties in her family, has transformed from "an uneducated rural woman" (in her own words) into a creative caregiver and a radical activist, during which we see how the good can emerge from the dark. Ultimately, the "dark anthropology" and "an anthropology of the good" are intertwined throughout the narratives in this thesis.

The other theoretical debate that has proved crucial to this work is, pertinent to my focus on family care, what Nicola Spakowski synthesizes as the "*critical* socialist feminism" that has emerged among Chinese feminist scholars since around 2010.[29] This new wave of feminist theory has dedicated itself to two major theoretical tasks, as far as I am concerned. First, it aims to critique the uncritical, ahistorical borrowing of western

---

[29] Emphasis in the original text. See Nicola Spakowski, "Socialist Feminism in Postsocialist China," *positions: asia critique* 26, no. 4 (2018): 561–592.

feminist theory by Chinese scholars. As Shaopeng Song argues, as it has been imported into the Chinese context, the whole body of western literature on feminist thinking has been reduced to gender theory, and gender theory has been further simplified to just two key concepts: subjectivity (*zhuti xing* 主体性) and autonomy (*zizhu xing* 自主性).[30] Song, in addition, astutely points out that the importation of gender theory and the springing up of neo-liberalism in mainland China have, curiously, taken place coincidently in the 1990s.[31] Between gender theory (reductionist western feminist thoughts in China) and neo-liberalist economy and ideology, there exists "an ambivalent complicity" (*aimei de tongmou guanxi* 暧昧的同谋关系), which essentially hinders Chinese feminist theorists in making a thorough critique of neo-liberalism.[32] Song's insight echoes Nancy Fraser's question: "Was there some perverse, subterranean elective affinity" between neoliberalism and second-wave feminism (which was imported to mainland China after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995)?[33]

---

[30] Shaopeng Song 宋少鹏, "'Shehui zhuyi funv jiefang yu xifang nvquan zhuyi de qubie: Lilun yu shijian' zuofanhui zongshu" '社会主义妇女解放与西方女权主义的区别: 理论与实践' 座谈会综述 [Report on the Seminar 'Differences between Socialist Women's Liberation and Western Feminism: Theory and Practice'], *Shanxi shifan daxue xuebao* 山西师范大学学报 [Journal of Shanxi Normal University] 38, no. 4 (2011): 143–9.
[31] Shaopeng Song 宋少鹏, "Ziben zhuyi shehui zhuyi he funv: weishenme zhongguo chongjian makesi zhuyi nvquan zhuyi pipan" 资本主义、社会主义和妇女: 为什么中国需要重建马克思主义女权主义批判 [Capitalism, Socialism, and Women: Why does China Needs to Rebuild Marxist Feminism], *Kaifang shidai* 开放时代 [Open Times], 12 (2012): 98–112.
[32] Song, "Ziben," 110.
[33] Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review* 56, no. 3 (2019): 97–119.

The probable answer, based on the Chinese context, is an unfortunate yes. The recent explosion of feminist discussions on Chinese social media, however pleasant it may appear, has accorded with Song's observations. One typical example is the debate on the work of the housewife. Most so-called feminists think of being a housewife as an individual choice—often an inferior one, compared to professional occupations outside the household that can financially support a woman—rather than a result of market selection or gendered coercion implied in state policy. This perspective is problematic in many ways. It is spoken from a rather privileged position and leads to internal divisions within the women group. It overemphasizes the potential of subjectivity and autonomy and neglects how individuals' choices are invariably conditioned by complex social contexts. Most crucially, by allying with individual freedom, a feminist gesture as such in effect covers up what it is supposed to critique, that is, the historical conditions that have led to housewives' dilemma in Chinese society today.

What should be reconstructed, against the prevalence of neo-liberal feminism, is Marxist feminist critique. Song calls for feminist debates hinged on political economy, which further require revisiting western Marxist feminism and specifically a concentration on women's productive and reproductive labor. This work aims to answer Song's call to reform Chinese feminist discourses by rediscovering Marxist feminism through the case of women's lives under the impact of a prominent disease caused by neoliberal capitalism. In doing so, this work also points to the inadequacy of the "dark

Marx" critique, connecting to the above theoretical thread in anthropology. As Gayle Rubin argues in her seminal piece "The Traffic in Women," the lack of critique of the "second aspect of 'material life'"—women's reproductive activities in the household—is where classical Marxism fails.[34] Many feminists have responded to Rubin's call and have started viewing the exploitation of women as an invisibilized chain of capitalist systems, or a living, borderless colony.[35] Housewives' labor, again, has been centered in these scholarly concerns. Relevant to women's role as caregivers for black lung patients, many studies of western Marxist feminism have been helpful to my analysis, as chapter 3 will illustrate.

Yet, any borrowing of western feminist theory may encounter new meanings and challenges in the Chinese context. It demands historical and contextual re-employment or, in Kuan-Hsing Chen's famous proposition, using "Asia as method."[36] It should also strive for what Walter Mignolo terms "epistemic disobedience" against "knowledge-making entrenched with imperial/colonial purposes."[37] Such an imperative to deimperialize theory/knowledge borrowed from the west, to the concerns of this work, links to the second theoretical task of "*critical* socialist feminism" in China, that is, to use

---

[34] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 169.
[35] Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Claudia von Werlhof, *Women: The Last Colony* (London; Atlantic Highlands, N.J., USA: Zed Books, 1988).
[36] Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
[37] Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009): 176.

"China's socialist past as a 'legacy' and 'resource' for today's society."[38] Admittedly, western Marxist feminist theory has proved relevant to Chinese women's lived experience. In particular, the critique of how neoliberal capitalism has exploited women in both their workplaces and their homes can start dismantling the complicity between the Chinese feminist discourses and economic reforms of the past several decades.

However, the gender division of labor existed in China in distinct forms before the arrival of neoliberal capitalism. For example, in the collectivist era, men and women took up different types of field labor, and men could usually earn more work points (*gongfen* 工分) than women.[39] This socialist past is further complicated by the longstanding Chinese traditions of the Confucian family, which still strongly drive women to accept familial responsibilities today. These historical trajectories and legacies that preexisted neoliberal capitalism in China require any attempt to borrow from western theory to undergo deep contextualization. Particularly in rural China, women's motivation to engage in reproductive labor is less about capitalist ideals of family (e.g., housework is "a labour of love") than gender roles defined in Chinese traditions and in decades of socialist policies (e.g., the "Dual Policy of Diligence and Frugality" "*liangqin*

[38] Spakowski, "Socialist Feminism," 561.
[39] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

fangzhen 两勤方针”).[40] While a thorough review of the emerging “*critical* socialist feminism” in China is not the concern of this work, I firmly embrace this new wave of feminist debates in thinking about and representing women’s experiences against black lung disease and its ensuing difficulties. When it is crucial to my interlocutors’ narratives, I borrow from western Marxist feminist theory, but I employ these ideas critically in connection to China’s historical conditions. Stories on the ground take priority in my work, and I always hope to understand “*the imponderabilia of actual life*” rather than subject my people to “universal“ theory or conceptualization in general.[41] This practice will, hopefully, support my acts of “epistemic disobedience.” Last but not least, this gesture of deimperialization and contextualization has also allowed me to connect back to the first theoretical thread on anthropological themes. The Chinese family, the key space of my inquiry, is both where neoliberal capitalism and impotent state policy are instantiated and where traditional virtues are preserved and their practitioners find personal values. It is, to some extent, in line with so-called universal trends, but it also goes against them and displays itself as a field of theory coming into being. It is, again, at once both “the dark” and “the good.”

[40] For capitalism and reproductive labor, see Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol, UK: Falling Wall Press, 1975). I keep the spelling “labour” in the original text. For the state ideology on women in China, see Weifang Liu, “The Whole Story of the Establishment of the ‘Dual Policy of Diligence and Frugality’ on Chinese Women’s Work,” in *Women, Family and the Chinese Socialist State, 1950-2010*, ed. Xiaofei Kang (Leidon, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020): 223–241.

[41] “The imponderabilia of actual life” is quoted from Bronisław Malinowski’s foundational work. See Bronisław Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1922), 18.

The ethnographic data in this thesis project is based on digital fieldwork conducted from March 2020 to January 2021. Initially I talked to black lung patients, activists (including volunteers in NGOs), and filmmakers who have done cinematic arts on relevant topics. Throughout these conversations, I was fascinated by the rich implications and meanings embedded in this one single disease, but also troubled by the evident lack of attention paid to women in the existing narratives on black lung. As aforementioned, I recognize that it is often not just individuals who are impacted by the disease, but also the family members behind them, especially the women who have to take up multiple responsibilities on men's behalf. In addition, the reality that most black lung patients are taken care of in the household and that the Chinese state has pushed sickened bodies back to the intimate space have further illustrated to me the necessity of looking at the family unit. Thus, to fill the gap in the existing scholarship, eliminate the long-term invisibility of women groups, and reveal the untold yet significant stories have constituted my intention, and sustained me, in conducting this project. What I hope to think about, needless to say, is not limited to the case of black lung in China, but also concerns some of the fundamental concepts in the field of medical humanities: care, illness, family, and reproductive labor, among others.

I started focusing on women in black lung patients' families in September 2020. In the beginning, I interviewed five families.[42] All the interviews were done via the mobile communication application of WeChat.[43] At first glance, each family struggles with similar issues directly or indirectly caused by the disease of black lung: poverty, pain and breathlessness, limited access to medical resources, fear of death, anxiety about an uncertain future, and no stable income, among others. Each of these terms can be heavy and heartrending enough on their own, let alone bound with the others. Moreover, each family's experience, and more relevantly, each woman's way of tackling the difficulties, is always distinctive based on their nuanced situations. Instead of generalizing the experience of families with black lung, I believe it is more ethical to document daily life, track personal histories, and attend to all kinds of details for a smaller number of families. Having fewer interlocutors yet paying great attention to and building sustainable relationships with each of them, it seems to me, also constitute important ethical ethnographic practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, I limited my digital fieldwork to only two families, which have turned into chapters 3 and 4, respectively, in this thesis. Both, I hope, will show how black lung disease has affected their families, domestic dynamics, and individual members' life trajectories in transformative and complicated ways.

---

[42] For confidentiality concerns, I only use pseudonyms or incomplete names (e.g., only the last name).

[43] WeChat, also known as Weixin 微信, is the most commonly used mobile communication application in mainland China.

I am aware of the question of representativeness that might challenge my focus on only two families. I also acknowledge that my thesis project will not be able to exhaust the complexity of black lung disease's impact on families in China, which might, again, take place in 873,000 distinct forms on the backs of 873,000 patients. Nevertheless, my approach might fall into the category of "person-centered ethnography." As Douglas Hollan argues, "a primary focus of person-centered ethnography is on the individual and on how the individual's … subjective experience both shape, and are shaped by, social and cultural processes."[44] I hope to understand big questions, major issues, and structural inequality through particularities, because each family's experience is related to its social, historical, political, and cultural contexts. Noticeably, the "person-centered ethnography" approach has been widely employed in works on illness and the caregiving experience. Jiang Nengjie, the film director of "Miners, the Horsekeeper, and Pneumoconiosis," visited more than ten families in his preliminary research yet decided to focus on just one family in his final work, because "the story in that family is the most striking, and thus can be better conveyed to the audience."[45] Ethnographies that have also helped me settle on "person-centered" narratives include, in particular, Arthur

---

[44] Douglas Hollan, "The Relevance of Person-Centered Ethnography to Cross-Cultural Psychiatry," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 34, no. 2 (1997): 219–34.
[45] The quote is from my interview with Jiang.

Kleinman's *The Illness Narratives* (1988 [2020]) and *The Soul of Care* (2019), and Yan Yunxiang's *Private Life Under Socialism* (2003).[46]

The impact of COVID-19 on an ethnographic project certainly cannot to be neglected. I have had to make many compromises during my ten months of digital fieldwork. While I have valued communication in the virtual space as being real fieldwork and attempted to do remote participant observation through video chats, digital tools fell short of my initial expectations in various ways. There have been numerous "wish I were there" moments. When Mei told me about the "disease in her heart" (*xinbing* 心病)—her elder son with a mental disability—I wished I were there holding her hands. When Mei proudly showed me her creative art pieces and energetic stock animals, I wished I were there to feel the liveliness in her house. When Yun told me that, despite her own declining health, she had to do taxing field labor every day, I wished I were there helping to carry some of her burdens. When the chat groups (organized by black lung patients and their family members) talked about someone's death or suicide, I wished I were at the scenes, witnessing, remembering, mourning, and ready to narrate. In so many moments, I could not resist pondering what might be different if I were there.

---

[46] Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Conditions* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Arthur Kleinman, *The Soul of Care: The Moral Education of a Husband and a Doctor* (New York: Viking, 2019); Yunxiang Yan, P*rivate Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

There have also been moments in which my interlocutors expressed the "wish you were here" sentiment. I was genuinely honored to receive phone calls or messages from my interlocutors when they could not sleep or simply felt bored and, most recently, at Chinese New Year. I was ecstatic to hear words like "you are just like our family" (*ni jiuxiang women de qinren yiyang de* 你就像我们的亲人一样的), "after talking to you, I feel so relaxed" (*xinli ganjue haoduo le* 心里感觉好多了), "it is just like I have found a daughter," and "if you lived close to us, that would warm my heart" (*wode xinli jiuhui hen nuan* 我的心里就会很暖). In building a semi-mother-daughter relationship with my interlocutors, I have been partly incorporated into their families and have become their non-biological family member. This has also, in turn, helped me to reflect upon my roles and responsibilities as an anthropologist and a semi-daughter—rather than a full daughter—of these two families. I have yet to be part of their real, offline daily life, but I can at least be a listener, as they might be expecting when they call me. It is probable that their expectations of me involve some fetishized imagination,[47] and might be distorted by the lack of face-to-face communication. As will be shown in chapters 3 and 4, Mei has two sons who have not been very helpful in sharing her burdens, while Yun has a rebellious daughter who truly worried her some years ago. I could sense throughout our chats that both are looking to me as a docile daughter, a figure whom I

---

[47] For "being a daughter in the field," see, for example, Jean Briggs, "Kapluna Daughter" in *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences*, ed. Peggy Golde (1970; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 19–44.

have never been in my own family. Regardless, the mutual care between me and them are real, and I take this work as a starting point rather than the end of a sustainable relationship with my interlocutors. I dedicate this work to them—as well as to workers and caregivers who are suffering and striving in their daily lives elsewhere around the globe—as my trivial payback to their contributions. And I will continue such efforts. As Charles Thompson writes, "once you begin a project, as with all gifts and works done in the field, its obligations can last forever."[48]

[48] Charles Thompson, "Guestworkers: Farmworkers, Filmmakers, and Their Obligations in the Field," in Viewpoints: Visual Anthropologists at Work, eds. Mary Strong, and Laena Wilder (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 197.

2. Disposable Bodies, Privatized Care

> 张海超: 尘肺病人的肺，比石头还坚硬，经济发展的代价，是人祸不是天灾。
> @张海超: 农民工的命不如狗
> @张海超: 每一个人都是华夏子孙，不应榨干一批人的血肉去支持一批人富起来
> 回复: 本来是先富带后富，现在成了先富剥削后富
> @张海超: 已经被认作牺牲品了……
>
> Zhang Haichao: Black lung patients' lungs are harder than stones. (The disease) is the price of economic development. (It) is a man-made catastrophe, not a natural disaster.
> @Zhang Haichao: Migrant workers' lives are cheaper than those of dogs.
> @Zhang Haichao: Everyone is a descendant of the Chinese. (We) should not exploit the flesh and blood of one group to make another group get rich first.
> Reply: People who get rich first are supposed to assist people who are left behind. But now the former is exploiting the latter.
> @Zhang Haichao: (Migrant workers) have been taken as disposable.[1]

One month after his friend Zhang Yuanjun, with a young child and an unclosed lawsuit left behind, passed away, Zhang Haichao wrote on his social media: "(Black lung) is the price of economic development. (It) is a man-made catastrophe, not a natural disaster."[2] In two sentences, Zhang alludes to the deep and dark history behind the disease that has afflicted the largest number of workers in China.

---

[1] Haichao Zhang 张海超, "Chenfeibingren de fei bi shitou hai ying" 尘肺病人的肺比石头还硬 [Black lung Patients' Lungs Are Harder Than Stones], *Sina Weibo*, last modified August 24, 2020, https://weibo.com/1918072305/JhrGzhy6F?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&ssl_rnd=1616032615.4734&type=comment.

[2] Zhang Yuanjun (张愿军) was a black lung patient (Phase III) as well as a volunteer for the organization of Love Save Pneumoconiosis (*da'ai qingchen* 大爱清尘). In 2015, he received a ventilator from the Love Save Pneumoconiosis and met Zhang Haichao. Since then, he started his voluntary service. In four years and one month of his time as a volunteer, he visited over 500 fellow patients. He passed away on July 26, 2020, aged 46. On the same day, Zhang Haichao wrote on his social media, "Zhang Yuanjun died at 5 o'clock in the morning on July 26. This may be a relief for him. May heaven be free of pneumoconiosis (*yuan tiantang meiyou chenfeibing* 愿天堂没有尘肺病). Rest in peace (*yilu zouhao* 一路走好)." For Zhang Yuanjun's life story, see Na Zhang 张娜, "Shizhe Zhang Yuanjun" 逝者张愿军 [Obituary: Zhang Yuanjun], last modified October 15, 2020, https://www.163.com/dy/article/FP0EJUGT0530SCGK.html.

By opening this chapter with Zhang's brief yet powerful remarks, I want to start with what is common knowledge for black lung patients yet frequently neglected by the general public. That is, the large number of black lung patients sickened in today's China is not only a public health crisis but also a historical problem; it demands looking back to the crucial year of 1978, the start of the "reform and opening" (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) period, and the economic reforms that followed over the next several decades. While many studies on black lung are aware of its historical causes, few scholars have closely examined the everyday life details of these ex-miners' lives. Scholars tend to attribute the cause of the disease to a lack of labor protection and poor working conditions at the mine sites.[3] Yet, these reasons are too general, if they are not situated in specific times and places. I will revisit what happened in those workers' mining careers, attempt to recapture the texture and senses of their daily activities, and more crucially, understand what miners' personal experiences mean in the larger context of nationwide reform in action.

I approach these everyday experiences in the mines as hidden narratives. They are rarely found in the existing literature and are obscured in the official discussions of black lung. This chapter explores the history of black lung patients (Liu and Cao) and of

---

[3] See, for instance, Yuhua Guo 郭于华, Xiaomian Wu 吴小沔, and Mingxun Zhao 赵茗煦, *Chenfeibing nongmingong koushu jilu* 尘肺病农民工口述记录 [The Oral Accounts of Migrant Workers with Black Lung] (Beijing: Intellectual Property Publishing House, 2020); Chun Dai 戴春, "Buneng huxi de tong" 不能呼吸的痛 [Pain of Breathlessness], *Tuanjie* 团结 [Unity] 2 (2013): 30–35; Wing-Chung Ho, *Occupational Health and Social Estrangement in China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

the mining industry, where most cases accumulate.[4] I explore as well other social transformations that took shape during the reform period, transformations that have also partially led to the dilemmas patients face and struggle with in their present lives. Specifically, I ask the following questions: what conditions have sickened such a large number of workers? What can we learn from personal narratives and experiences? To what extent might personal history accord with or deviate from official industrial and social history? The recent publication of *The Oral Accounts of Migrant Workers with Black Lung* by Guo Yuhua and her colleagues at Qinghua University in Beijing have addressed some of these questions,[5] reviewing black lung patients' personal histories and decoding the social meanings of their medical experiences, with a particular focus on what Arthur Kleinman has called "illness narratives."[6] While drawn to Kleinman's perspective on how to study and read a disease, I differentiate my research approach both from Guo and her colleagues' and Kleinman's in this chapter. My focus is on ex-miners' experience at their workplace, situated in the history of the mining industry, and how they are linked to other relevant social changes during the reform period.

---

[4] Other industries where black lung cases accumulate include urban construction, metallurgy and machinery manufacturing, and textile production.

[5] Guo et al., *The Oral Accounts*. It should be noted that oral accounts in this book do cover some information about the conditions in those patients' previous workplaces. Yet, those narratives are relatively brief and occasional. They still serve the main narratives of being sickened with black lung (thus illness narratives), without focusing on the mining industry.

[6] Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Conditions* (1988; repr., New York: Basic Books, 2020).

Geographically, my focus is on Shanxi province (*shanxi sheng* 山西省), a region so famous for its mining industry that coal mining has become almost synonymous with the place.[7] Shanxi is a cultural phenomenon itself, that has inspired novels, films, and other artistic creations.[8] My historical methods are threefold. I consulted the "Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle 1978–2010" (*Shanxi meitan gongye zhi 1978–2010* 山西煤炭工业志 1978-2010), interviewed two black lung patients who previously worked at mines in Shanxi (Liu and Cao; more than ten hours in total), and investigated secondary historical accounts on the extensive privatization that occurred during that period. My investigation of the *Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle* and my interviews with black lung patients and ex-miners have uncovered a strong asymmetry—a discursive disjuncture—between official accounts and lived experiences. Further, I reveal and unpack a (sub)contracting system across public and private mining properties in this chapter in order to challenge the common scholarly assumption that there is a "dual-track" system in the mining industry, wherever it occurs in China.[9] In what follows, I start with an analysis of the mining industry across China and in Shanxi province. I then turn to a discussion of my interlocuter's oral histories. Based on a comparison between

---

[7] See Appendix A: Distribution of Coal Resources in Shanxi.
[8] For novels, see the *Wujin* Prize (National Mining Literature Prize); for films, see *Shanhe guren* 山河故人 [Mountains May Depart], directed by Jiang Zhangke 贾樟柯 (2015), Film; *Sanxia haoren* 三峡好人 [Still Life], directed by Jiang Zhangke 贾樟柯 (2006). Film; *Meiqian* 煤钱 [Coal Money], directed by Wang Bing 王兵 (2009), Film.
[9] Tim Wright, *The Political Economy of the Chinese Coal Industry: Black Gold and Blood-stained Coal* (London: Routledge, 2012), 13. The "dual-track" system is also termed as "two-tier" in, for example, Vaclav Smil, *China's Past, China's Future: Energy, Food, Environment* (London: Routledge, 2003).

the official promises and personal lived experience, I then look at the larger picture of extensive privatization in various social and industrial sectors to date.

Overturning the State's Rhetoric

It should first be noted that the mining industry is not uniform; rather, it is a mixture of various operation systems. For example, the extractive activities filmed in Jiang Nengjie's documentary *Miners, the Horsekeeper and Pneumoconiosis* are—in the 21st century— illegal and rare, as the mines' resources have dried up and the state has regained most properties from private owners since 1998.[10] In the 1980s, however, the state strongly encouraged private ownership of coal mines and private extraction. As privatization deepened across various sectors, the central government delegated its control over coal to the local level. Except for mines governed by the state, the operation of small, local mines was opened to almost anyone: "communes, brigades, the general public, professional personnel, cadres, technical personnel, and workers themselves."[11] As a result, there emerged a "dual-track" system around the country. The system consisted of large-scale state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and small-scale township- and

---

[10] Jiang Nengjie's documentary *Miners, the Horsekeeper and Pneumoconiosis* was a hit on Chinese social media in 2020. While it has raised the public awareness of the issues around the black lung and the mining industry, the illegal extractive activities revealed in the documentary were also seriously criticized. Jiang did not release the film until recently precisely because he was concerned that revealing these illegal activities would cause troubles to the mine owners and miners. "Now everything has been cleaned up in the mountains, and these people have started their new jobs. Releasing the film would not affect them much." Jiang told me in our interview. It has been nearly 10 years, since Jiang started collecting footage and working on this film. The film was also introduced in the first chapter, especially the footnote 3.

[11] Elspeth Thomson, *The Chinese Coal Industry: An Economic History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 118.

village-owned enterprises (TVEs). Scholars who compare these two types of enterprise have come to the consensus that SOEs were well-regulated, efficient, and possibly more sustainable, while TVEs were more or less illegal, unregulated, wasteful in resources, and dangerous in extraction.[12] For example, Vaclav Smil notes that small mines were often much lower in efficiency and much higher in accident rates and death toll.[13] Criticizing the lack of regulation over TVEs, Smil goes as far as to challenge E. F. Schumacher's early defense of small-scale businesses, concluding that "small is not always beautiful."[14] Most relevantly, based on her ethnographic research conducted in a hospital specialized in black lung disease, Feiyi Kuai notes that patients who worked or work for SOEs can usually receive better compensation and are "luckier" than those employed by private mines.[15]

Nevertheless, when it comes to the mining industry, it is important to note an evident lack of historical sources. On the one hand, there exists very limited literature about the histories of those small mines, as most were operated by private owners for only a short period of time. It is thus dubious to claim that the existing statistics for TVEs are complete and accurate. On the other hand, most literature that describes the

---

[12] See, for instance, Huaichuan Rui, *Globalization, Transition and Development in China: The Case of Coal Industry* (London, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005); David G. Fridley, *China Energy Databook* (Berkeley: Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, 2001); Wright, *Political Economy*.
[13] Smil, *China's Past*, 17.
[14] Smil, *China's Past*, 43.
[15] Feiyi Kuai, "Breathing In and Shouting Back: Black Lung Disease and Neo-liberalism in China," (Undergraduate Thesis, Duke University, 2017), 49–50.

regulation and advanced technology of SOEs has been written by government officials and therefore may have been shaped to suit their various motivations and incentives. This should not surprise us, as many studies on China have drawn attention to the asymmetry between theory/policy and its implementation.[16] So it is crucial to ask: Is it possible that the Chinese mining history also witnessed such an asymmetry? These questions prompted me to examine the nuances of the so-called "dual-track" system by combining data collected from official historical sources with the personal experience of miners. The findings of my comparative study are surprising: to a certain degree, they call into doubt the very existence of a "dual-track" system, and thus the variations of compensation that workers in different enterprises could receive. These findings challenge the common scholarly assumption about the duality of the mining industry in China, and also unfold stories different from those in Kuai's ethnographic research. I will first analyze the official account.

Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle documents the development of state-owned coal mining enterprises in Shanxi province from 1978 to 2010. It was compiled by the Shanxi Provincial Local History Committee, an office organized by the Shanxi Provincial Government. In the "red tape" writing style typical of Chinese government

[16] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

documents,[17] *Chronicle* includes an extensive account of various aspects of managing SOEs in Shanxi, including discussions of personnel, education, survey, production, safety, and protection of both humans and the environment. Most relevant to our investigation of black lung disease is a chapter on "coal mining safety," which suggests that the mines had systemic management and strict rules for both managers and workers. According to *Chronicle*, Shanxi established the Coal Mining Safety Supervision System in 1981—the start of the sixth five-year plan and not long after the start of the reform period. From that point on through to the 1990s, the Shanxi Provincial Government gradually delegated supervisors to major cities and other lower districts.[18] The majority of the chapter on coal mining safety implies that a comprehensive safety supervision system was under construction and that it had specific requirements, such as supervisors' submission of regular reports about the coal mines under their charge to the higher administration, as well as the provision to provide safety training and

[17] "Red tape" is an idiom also used in English, but it has nuanced meanings in the Chinese context. China Daily explains it as "excessive regulation or rigid conformity to formal rules that is considered redundant or bureaucratic and hinders or prevents action or decision-making." See https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/trans/2012-09/18/content_15765857.htm, accessed March 18, 2021. The term is often translated as "繁文缛节" (*fanwen rujie*), which literally means unnecessary and overelaborate formalities, or as "官僚作风" (*guanliao zuofeng*), which literally means bureaucracy. It should be noted that "red tape" in today's China is a result of a long history of centralized and standardized governance dating back to the Qin dynasty. See Michael Tan, "Red Tape China", *Charter* 71, no. 2 (2000): 40–41.
[18] "Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle" Compilation Committee "山西煤炭工业志"编纂委员会编, *Shanxi meitan gongye zhi 1978–2010* 山西煤炭工业志 1978–2010 [Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle 1978–2010] (Beijing: China Coal Industry Publishing House, 2015), 267–268.

educational activities to workers.[19] The *Chronicle* celebrates its own success in decreasing the accident rate: from 1979 to 1989, for example, the death toll per million tons of coal was above 5%—in 1980, indeed, it was as high as 9.27%.[20] After taking the measures described in the *Chronicle*, this figure dropped to 2.72% in 1990 and 1.85% in 2000.[21] Yet, the actual implementation of these requirements is entirely absent from the document. Further, these so-called trainings seem from the general description to have focused on sudden accidents such as explosions, rather than chronic harm to the miners' bodies, as we find with black lung.[22]

The decrease in the accident rate cannot excuse the lack of information in other regards. Crucially, it is unknown what actions were taken to protect the workers on a daily basis. Specifically, were workers required or advised to wear protective equipment such as facemasks and gloves in the mines? What were the living and working conditions at mine sites? Did workers get regular medical check-ups and compensation when they were injured or became sick? Safety measures that related directly to workers' daily life are barely mentioned. This absence is to be expected, since the document was written by government officials to celebrate economic growth and the maturity of the management system. It is primarily a eulogy written in support of the

---

[19] "*Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle*," 282.
[20] "*Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle*," 267.
[21] "*Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle*," 280–281.
[22] "*Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle*," 282–285.

state! Yet, it may also reveal hidden facts that are purposely neglected by this very kind of document. Using just one source to understand the management of SOEs is arguably inadequate. It is therefore necessary to include information from other sources, especially those that reflect the everyday experience of the miners.

In general, two key points can be drawn from my interpretation of this official source. First, sudden on-site accidents and chronic occupational diseases, such as black lung, are two distinctive but equally harmful types of violence that affect miners' safety and health, but attention to and measures for the former significantly overshadow the latter. While mine explosions are certainly violent and destructive, they are nonetheless—and this is not to trivialize their damage—occasional.[23] That is to say, explosions do not happen to all miners across the country. Each accident is easy to distinguish and is clearly preserved in the historical record. By contrast, the harm caused to human bodies by the dust at the mine sites takes years to show and, generally speaking, many hospital visits to diagnose. Further, while there are no data to show what percentage of ex-miners have developed black lung, the large number of confirmed cases indicates the enormity of the problem. Black lung is much more frequent than explosions but is rarely discussed in industrial reports such as the

---

[23] It should also be noted that mine explosions are somewhat of a spectacle and can draw great attention from both the general public and, in particular, investigative journalism. In some cases, this type of abrupt accidents serves as a starting point of research or investigation on the entire industry and thus facilitates the revelation of certain hidden aspects, as the case of "June 22 explosion" in Shanxi Province will show in the below.

Chronicle. Second, there may be a gap between policies related to mine safety and their implementation. The safety bureau was established, and the regulations were well written, but to what extent these were effective in real situations remains a question, one that can hardly be answered through the investigation of official documents.

What actually happened to the coal miners? Were the written regulations carried out as suggested by the government officials? What personal experiences might be recounted alongside the histories of industrial and economic triumph? In order to reveal the other side of the story, I consulted oral accounts and news reports. My findings both confirmed and contradicted my expectations. I was not astonished to learn about the government officials' misconduct and corruption, which was quite common in Chinese bureaus until recent years.[24] Yet, I was surprised to learn about the overlap between SOEs and TVEs, which are considered to be distinct entities in the current scholarship. In short, the apparent duality of the coal mining industry refers only to ownership, while the actual management and operation is completely arbitrary. This kind of practices, consequently, pushed those presumably protected workers (hired by SOEs) into a vulnerable and precarious status, let alone those who worked for private owners.

On June 22, 2002, a mining accident in Fanzhi County of Shanxi Province shocked the whole of China. The explosion took place at one mine located on the

---

[24] Xi Jinping's government committed to combating corruption in 2013. With a series of robust actions and the sentencing of many government officials, misconduct and corruption have lessened in recent years.

northern side of the Wutai Mountain, one of 33 mines on the same mountain. At the time of the explosion, there were 40 workers beneath the ground. The accident consequently killed 37 of them. According to the Xinhua News Agency, the immediate cause of the accident was that the mine operator had illegally placed explosives in the pit, which was already dangerous enough.[25] Even worse, the operator did not allow the workers to stop underground work once he saw the dense smoke coming from the mines, thus delaying the rescue and sacrificing more lives. Right after the accident, all the mines on the mountain were cleaned up. Most surprisingly, this horrifying accident did not take place at an irresponsible and unregulated private mine; rather, it took place at a mine owned by the state. In fact, all of the 33 mines at Wutai mountain were owned by the Yizhai Mine Corporation, one of the largest SOEs in Shanxi Province. This fact, combined with the horror of the accident, promptly cast doubts on the so-called well-regulated SOEs and the "dual-track" system that has developed since the 1980s.

It was also due to this accident that the chaotic management of the Chinese mining industry was revealed. In question was a complicated contracting (*chengbao* 承包) and subcontracting system employed by many SOEs. I will introduce the general operation of this system—synthesized from my interlocutors' oral accounts—before moving on to miners' lived experience under it. Other than the owner (the state, in this

[25] "'Jingji banxiaoshi' jizhe qinli Shanxi Fanshi kuangnan diaocha" '经济半小时'记者亲历山西繁峙矿难调查 [Economic Half Hour' Reporter Went to Shanxi Fanzhi Mine Disaster Investigation], *CCTV*, last modified July 5, 2002, http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2002-07-05/2222626987.html.

case) and the miner, the contractor plays the other essential role throughout the entire management system. Contractors act as intermediaries between the state and the workers. They obtain the rights of extraction from the SOEs—a process that often involves corruption. In most cases, contractors did not have official certificates that could legitimize their execution rights; rather, their power over the mines was largely based on oral consent from the SOEs as well as their ability to gain "prestige" among the workers. By claiming themselves as the "boss" or the "manager," these contractors were endowed with supreme powers to decide nearly everything at the mine sites. To achieve the production targets assigned by the state, contractors hired the miners, arranged working schedules and living conditions, and also decided salaries (among other matters relevant to extractive activities).

However, although these contractors were "hired" and paid by the SOEs, their arrangements at the mines did not have to follow enterprise regulations (i.e. those claimed in documents like the *Chronicle*), including how much to pay the workers. As a consequence of these contractors' absolute power, workers' salaries were reduced to a minimum; workers took up extremely long shifts and lived in very poor conditions, and they did not have labor contracts nor legal rights to protect themselves. Among the 33 mines at the mountain that were cleaned up after the June 22 explosion, 32 were under the operation of private contractors, although all of them were still the property of the

state.[26] Furthermore, in many cases, there existed more than one contractor between the state and the workers. Rich people could obtain the extraction rights at a large mine or several mines from the state, and then hire more contractors to break down their production goals. Thus, between the top (the state, the owner) and the bottom (the workers), there could be a hierarchy of contractors.

This system resembled the Household Contract Responsibility System (*Jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi* 家庭联产承包责任制)—a state policy implemented in the agriculture sector since 1978. The SOEs would first delegate the full rights of operation to the contractors—a process that was often determined by interpersonal relationships (e.g. kinship, friendship) or economic interests (i.e. corruption/ kickbacks). Thereafter, the SOEs would set up production goals for contractors, requiring them to regularly turn in a certain quantity of mine products. Subtracting what was turned in to the enterprise, the contractor could keep the extras and sell them on the market for more personal interests. For the state, the actual management by the contractors did not matter, as long as the latter fulfilled production tasks on time. For the workers, their employment relationship with the enterprises was never legal or acknowledged, despite the fact that they worked on mines owned by the state. Workers worked for contractors—the only representatives with whom they could negotiate their conditions

---

[26] Chunhui Luan 栾春晖, "Sibu mingmu de kongsu: Shanxi sheng fanzhi xian '6.22' kuangnan zhuizong" 死不瞑目的控诉: 山西省繁峙县'6.22' 矿难追踪 [Deadly Accusation: Shanxi Fanzhi '6.22' Mine Disaster Tracking], last modified July 2, 2002, http://news.southcn.com/china/zgkx/200207020669.htm.

and salaries. For the contractors, the more they could exploit workers, the more personal wealth they accumulated. In addition, contractors rarely hired workers on the job market. They found workers through acquaintances. Most contractors had strong connections to potential workers from their hometowns. Usually, there would already be a relationship between a contractor and a worker before working together at the mine sites.

Such a "contract responsibility system" in the mining industry made SOEs in reality operate and be managed like TVEs. The so-called "dual-track" system was merely untenable rhetoric that helped veil the chaos in the entire mining industry and push the private owners to be blamed. The strict regulations set by the state in the *Chronicle* were only followed by very few mine sites that remained in the hands of the SOEs. The majority, like 32 of the 33 mines at Wutai Mountain, were operated under a mixed, chaotic contracting system and fell into the complex "SOE–contractors–(subcontractors)–workers" chain. Governed by these hierarchies, most miners who worked indirectly for the SOEs enjoyed no better conditions than those working for the TVEs. If a re-reading of the notorious June 22 explosion points towards a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the mining industry in Shanxi, then oral accounts by former miners can reveal to us more details about their daily lived experience in, in their words, a "world governed by scoundrels."

“World Governed by Scoundrels”

Liu is a witness of the June 22 accident.[27] He worked in various places across Shanxi from 1992 to 2002. At the time of the explosion, he was a miner at one mine belonging to the Yizhai Mine Corporation. His workplace was located right next to the accident mine. Luckily, he was hospitalized due to an early injury (unrelated to the explosion), and was not directly affected by the accident—although he did lose his job after all the mines on the Wutai Mountain were cleaned up. The accident turned out to end his career as a miner. Recalling his years of working experience in Shanxi, he said, “it was a world governed by scoundrels (*liumang* 流氓). It was not part of a legal society (*fazhi shehui* 法治社会).” When Liu left Shanxi, he did not receive the salary promised earlier by the contractor. Several years after returning to his hometown and working as a farmer, he was diagnosed with black lung. Yet, like many other black lung patients, Liu did not receive any compensation due to a lack of proof of his previous employment relationship.[28] The disease has deprived Liu of his labor capacity, and thus his status as a breadwinner for the family. In a traditional rural Chinese family, the man usually brings

---

[27] Liu prefers not to use his full name.

[28] For various reasons, it is difficult for black lung patients to trace their previous employers and obtain the proof. Their employers may have left the area. Some patients worked for many places as seasonal workers, and none of those employers would admit this temporary relationship. Even if patients find their previous employers, they would probably be turned down. However, Liu’s case is more complicated. As will be shown in the below, he is hired as an uncontracted miner under a hierarchy of private contractors. This situation makes it almost impossible to obtain a proof.

in the income, while the woman takes up domestic work.[29] In Liu's family, the black lung diagnosis has pushed his wife to shoulder both responsibilities and thus reverse the traditional gender roles to which they had been accustomed. In addition to his declining health, Liu also has to deal with this perceived threat to his masculinity: "it is just a man's shame to completely rely on a woman," he told me in one of our conversations.

After learning about Liu's current daily struggles with the incurable disease and low self-esteem, I revisited his description of a "world governed by scoundrels" through his accounts. People choose to work in mines because of the high salary in comparison to other labor-intensive industries, as I was repeatedly told in my interviews. However, according to Liu, he was never paid what the contractors had promised. The miners' salary was mostly measured by extraction meters. It ranged from 300 to 500 Chinese yuan per meter. The contractor did set and update the workers' salaries based on their workload every month, but never paid them accordingly. Sometimes workers would be given a few hundred yuan as "pocket money" (*linghuaqian* 零花钱). Before the Chinese New Year, workers could receive one or two thousand yuan for expenses during the holiday celebration. However, the actual salary always remained just numbers in the contractor's notebook. The payment would be "promised" and the amount owed would

[29] This division of labor common to most Chinese families will be explained in detail in chapters 3 and 4, with references to the existing scholarship and my interlocutors' experiences.

accumulate. Workers remain trapped in their positions in the hope of one day finally receiving the full amount of their salary owed to them. Occasionally, workers firmly asked for full payment, but these demands were always responded to with small amounts of “pocket money” and such excuses as “the contractor has not received money from the enterprise yet.”

After the June 22 explosion, Liu was told by his contractor that the mine he was working at had gone bankrupt; the contractor simply could not afford any further payment. Liu recalled, “I was in deep despair, once I realized that I had ended up working for nothing for ten years (*shinian quandou baizuo le* 十年全都白做了).” While I have talked to a number of black lung patients before and thus somehow prepared to hear stories of injustice, I was extremely furious about what happened to Liu. During our conversations, I had to confirm with him, again and again, if I understood his narratives correctly. I found it intensely sorrowful to hear how his experience in fact invalidated the very reason for working in the mines. That said, as most miners, Liu chose to work in the mining industry because of higher promised salaries, yet he ended up earning literally nothing. Ten years, which took up the majority of Liu’s youth, turned out little more than everyday tolerance of poor working conditions, constant disillusion, and a blackening lung. Liu’s shame about relying on his wife, also, at once makes more sense. In that ten years, Liu was not able to spend much time with his family (his hometown is distant from Shanxi), nor send much money back home. Yet, his

declining health conditions caused by black lung has forced him to rely on his family member whom he did not manage to support much in the past. Liu's experience in the mining industry strongly refutes one common indifferent view about the black lung disease: it is a consequence of individual's occupational choice, and patients themselves should be held accountable; after all, they earn the money and it is not uncommon that people in a neo-liberal capitalist system sacrifice their health in exchange for money.[30] Who can stick to such social Darwinist views, in the face of Liu's story, instead of criticizing the problems of the system? Perhaps people within the system who are reluctant to admit the systemic flaws and strategically avoiding the responsibilities. We may remind ourselves again of Zhang's words quoted in the opening of this chapter: "(black lung) is a man-made catastrophe."

As my anger intensified, I also kept asking: what made these contractors so "audacious"? Liu's narrative alluded to two major reasons. First, these contractors had strong connections at the local level, both with the government and/or organized crime, while workers usually came from other parts of the country and had no one to resort to for (legal or illegal) assistance. Liu mentioned that some workers who resolutely requested to receive their deserved salaries were "punished" (e.g., beaten up) by the

[30] For example, Jiang Nengjie's film received a comment that "(they are) living in poverty because they are not working hard enough. They do not deserve lives." This view, unfortunately, is not exceptional. Many of my interlocutors were told by their local government that black lung disease is their "personal affairs (*geren de shi* 个人的事)" and that patients should not seek for help from the governments.

contractor. Secondly, except for a small group of workers directly employed by the enterprise, most miners in Shanxi at the time were uncontracted, meaning that their labor was completely outside the legal system and was not protected by the law. Salaries were only orally negotiated between contractors and workers, a practice with which few workers found wrong. Back then, China was yet to establish a so-called legal society. The legislation that ensued after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976) was not applicable to the reform period during which new challenges were posed by the rapid marketization of various industries and the shifting socio-political environment. It was not until the year of 1997 that "rule of law" (*yifa zhiguo* 依法治国) was confirmed as the basic guideline by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Most relevant to our concerns, the "Labor Law of the PRC" (*laodong fa* 劳动法) was promulgated in 1994, and the "Law of the PRC on the Prevention and Treatment of Occupational Diseases" (*zhiyebing fangzhi fa* 职业病防治法) in 2001. The issue of these laws served as passive responses to existing and increasingly intensifying social conflicts, rather than the other way. Prior to the belated arrival of "rule of law" (and arguably its comprehensive implementation at a much later time), there had long been a society accustomed to "rule of (a selected group of) people." In this case, it was ruled by mine owners and contractors, or, again, by "scoundrels." Against this historical backdrop, it was almost impossible for these workers—most of whom had limited educational background—to realize the importance of labor contracts. Their work was based on trust in the contractor from the

beginning, because the job was so often introduced by acquaintances. If a worker requested to sign a contract, he would simply be fired.[31] Pressured by a series of illegal arrangements, workers had to follow the rules if they wanted to maintain their jobs.

Ironically, there was a type of "contract" introduced by the contractor. It was a document that detailed monthly production tasks for each worker and was signed only by the individual worker. Miners had to stick to the "contract" and fulfill those tasks; otherwise, their salaries, which were rarely paid but merely written numbers on paper, would be affected. This arrangement would be plotted by the contractor to speed up the mining process in reaction to the fierce competition of nearby mines. Without question, this was an unfair clause employed by the contractor to restrict and threaten the workers. According to the contractors' logic, meanwhile, such an illegal "agreement" appeared as a "legal contract." The very existence of this type of "contract" instantiates how social and legal agreement was deeply corrupt at that time.

Occasionally, there would be inspections from the SOEs. Here, we recall what was documented in the *Chronicle*: after the Coal Mining Safety Supervision was established, supervisors were delegated by the provincial government to places around Shanxi. Yet, Liu's accounts revealed the reality of these supervision activities:

> "The coal bosses (contractors) were just scoundrels (*liumang* 流氓; *gen heidao yiyang* 跟黑道一样) . Sometimes there were inspections that required them to

[31] Unfortunately, this is still the case in today's Chinese labor market. It is extremely severe in urban construction sites. Except for those directly hired by big corporations, many workers have no labor contract.

> buy insurance for us. The bosses would buy it for three or four people out of one hundred workers … you know, just some performance (*zhuangzhuang yangzi* 装装样子)! Then they would bribe the inspectors with cash and expensive gifts. They did not even hide the bribery (*huilu doushi mingmu zhangdan de*! 贿赂都是明目张胆的!) ! Next time the inspectors came, they hung out and drank together. They were brothers (*xiongdi* 兄弟) !"

Indeed, there was a "brotherly cooperation" between SOEs officials and contractors from the private sector, a cooperation that involved brazen transactions of power and money. In Liu's case, the state-owned mines and private operators were not separate from each other. Instead, in practice the two operation systems overlapped and were coordinated. Mines of SOEs were managed based on TVEs' rules, while TVE operators could easily intrude into SOEs and benefit from the state-owned mines by exploiting workers below them.

The next story I want to convey ironically shows that, in comparison to Liu—who worked for SOEs—a worker for TVEs could be slightly "luckier."[32] Cao worked in the mining industry for 13 years, from 1997 to 2010, longer and later than Liu.[33] Most of his workplaces were private mines. Cao recalled that in the 1990s, his salary could be as high as 3,000 yuan per month, and this increased to around 7,000 yuan per month in the 2000s. And unlike Liu's salary—which was merely numbers on pages in the contractor's notebook—Cao received most of his payment. A comparison between these two cases reveals that there were simply no standard payments, whether in the SOEs or TVEs.

---

[32] Cao prefers not to use his full name.

[33] Cao worked in Shanxi from 1997 to 2002, in Hebei from 2002 to 2006, and in Henan from 2006 to 2010.

Certainly, payment was just one aspect of their labor rights. Cao's high salary did not help change his conditions nor protect him from the black lung disease. Cao's and Liu's working and living conditions were surprisingly similar, and arguably also describe the average experience for miners in the 1990s and early 2000s. Mines had to be in operation for 24 hours every day, with ceaseless rotations between workers in charge of different tasks. Cao was responsible for the drilling. Most of his shifts lasted more than 10 hours, and he had no holidays. He would go to sleep right after each shift, as he might be called back to work at any minute if other work, such as shipping and loading, was required. Most mines were remote, in the middle of nowhere, so work and sleep became the only activities in miners' daily life. They simply slept in the "shelters" next to the mines temporarily built out of wood and plastic. In Shanxi, which is located in the north of China, it could be extremely cold and windy in winter. Workers could only warm themselves by burning coal, which, in turn, would immerse them in additional dust. It is not too much to say that their everyday lives were engulfed in dust. In terms of meals, there was a cook at each site preparing typical mess-hall food (*daguofan* 大锅饭 *)*. In addition, meals were not free. The contractor deducted the costs of meals from workers' salaries, which was either already meager or non-existent.

Most relevant to our concern about the prevalence of black lung cases is that there was barely any protection against intensive dust exposure at the mine sites. Liu recalled that every time he came up from underground, dust accumulated on his face

could be up to four or five millimeters thick. Sometime in the 2000s—possibly due to the emergence of black lung cases—contractors and workers started to realize the importance of protection. Cao and his co-workers began wearing single-use facemasks (*yicixing kouzhao* 一次性口罩) in 2005, but the costs of the masks were also subtracted by the contractor from their salaries. Liu had started wearing facemasks in the late 1990s. Yet, it was not a requirement; workers purchased masks by themselves. Additionally, the actual utility of the facemasks was quite doubtful. Most miners could only afford cheap, low-quality, and dispensable masks, and continued to wear the same ones until they were completely worn-out. Ultimately, the miners' basic needs could not be fulfilled, let alone their protection or safety education. In contrast to the regulations stated in the *Chronicle*, the real situation was such that the management at the mine sites was contingent and arbitrary—regardless of whether they were run by SOEs or TVEs. As frequently echoed by my interlocutors, "*luan* 乱," which can be translated as "messy," "disordered," or "chaotic," accurately describes the situations in this "world governed by scoundrels." The management followed few regulations. The contract was corrupt. The working and living conditions need not reach even minimal requirements. And when all forms of injustice struck, workers had no legal means to turn to.

Under Privatization: Bodies, Care, and Family

My comparative analysis in the preceding section of written documents and miners' oral accounts illustrates how the murkiness of the so-called "dual-track" system

in the mining industry could lead to extremely poor working conditions and workers' financial precarity; workers were disposable and easily discarded. In the Shanxi mining industry, the operation and management systems were highly manipulated, through the exchange of power and money, for personal interests. The "brotherly cooperation" between state-owned mines and private contractors has reduced workers to "bare life" subjected not only to the capitalization and privatization of the Chinese economy but to state biopolitics.[34] Through economic reforms in a variety of industries—which launched at a quite steady pace but shortly brought about radical changes—the state determined who died and who lived, who got sickened and disabled and who got to live a healthy life.

As Paul Fussell notes, there are only two sorts of work; one is safe, the other one is dangerous.[35] While written in the US context, this categorization also describes the divergence of people's life into two tracks since the reform period in Chinese history. The collective era has been left behind. The state's responsibilities of caring for its citizens had to give way to burgeoning economic development. The market got to choose people: those low-educated villagers go to the mines, the construction sites, and the small factories, while those better educated, decent-look urban residents enter their modern offices in skyscrapers built by the former group who have engaged dangerous

---

[34] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
[35] Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).

work and have long faded into the background. Based on the study of black lung (and arguably many other "occupational" cases), I would further elaborate on Fussell's note by adding that people who engage safe and dangerous work do not work separately in their respective terrains or simply co-live in one society. Rather, those who participate in more risky jobs may serve the other group at the expense of their own safety, mobility, health, and ultimately, life.

This elaboration of Fussell's note on class disparity, in addition, links back to the comments made on Zhang's social media posts cited in the beginning of this chapter. One of Zhang's followers writes that "(we) should not exploit the flesh and blood of one group to make another group get rich first." This is echoed by another comment lamenting that "People who get rich first are supposed to assist people who are left behind. But now the former is exploiting the latter." Both remarks reveal the essence of relationships between different classes and, subtly and ironically, respond to Deng Xiaoping's proposition of "The rich first pushing those being rich later" (*xianfu daidong houfu* 先富带动后富). Be this famous slogan by Deng a utopian fantasy or a strategic rhetoric, the reality in the past several decades has been that "the rich first" have kept accumulating private property,[36] while those who were promised to "[be] rich later"

---

[36] The Gini index of China increased dramatically from 0.310 in 1981 to 0.484 in 2007. The urban-rural income gap has also been rising. See, for example, Ricardo Molero-Simarro, "Inequality in China Revisited. The Effect of Functional Distribution of Income on Urban Top Incomes, The Urban-rural Gap and the Gini Index, 1978–2015," *China Economic Review* 42 (2017): 101–117.

have been increasingly marginalized and out of sight.[37] Black lung patients—ex-miners, ex-constructors, and many others—who built and powered up the city and dug out the minerals for digital devices are now today begging on the street, shouting in front of government buildings, and bending down their bodies at homes (to ease the breathlessness) for a space of care and breath. This relational process is, of course, alienated and rendered invisible. In Chinese state biopolitics, those who do safer work are marketed as independent, neo-liberal subjects who have the freedom to make their own decisions and move towards their own destinations as long as no visible, illegal harm is caused to other beings, while others are categorized into a "zones of disposability," in which they are treated as "the expended, surpluses populations figured as forms of bare life, at-risk populations, warehoused, disposable people."[38] Why would a protected class have conversations with the governed, disposable class? Maybe yes, maybe not. But that is not the major concern of the Chinese biopolitical project.[39]

This is certainly not to deny the subjectivity of these ex-miners and their fellows or to overemphasize the subjectivity of a more protected class, which risks trapping this

---

[37] For the marginalization of sick workers, see Wing-Chung Ho, "Biopolitics, Occupational Health and State Power: The Marginalization of Sick Workers in China," *The China Quarterly* 219 (2014): 808–826.
[38] Neferti X. M. Tadiar, "Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (2013): 19–48.
[39] See, for example, Katherine Mason's discussion on "bifurcation of service and governance" in the sector of Public Health and how people on one side barely have human contact with the other, in Katherine Mason, *Infectious Change: Reinventing Chinese Public Health After Pandemic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

historical inquiry in an obsessive focus on what Joel Robbins calls the "suffering slot."[40] The precariousness in a neo-liberal world is shared by all beings, as shown by Chinese reports on labor issues in recent years.[41] Rather, this is to point out the historical conditions that have led to current black lung patients' struggles as well as the relationality of these conditions to every Chinese national's life in the past decades. One's subjectivity has always been qualified by various biopolitical agendas—direct ones like the "one-child" policy and the recent "reeducation"/internment camps in the Uyghur region and indirect ones like the opening of the capitalist market in a former socialist regime—and ultimately, the transforming of socio-political structures.[42] Back in the 1990s, the Chinese state favored the saying that the market is an "invisible hand" (*wuxing de shou* 无形的手) capable of allocating the resources and regulating the supply and demand. If we wisely followed market rules and adjusted our steps we would transition into a new era. Yet, as Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell argue, in the PRC, "state power and policies have been the creators, not the creations, of a transformed

---

[40] Joel Robbins, "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3 (2013): 447–62.

[41] For "a shared vulnerability," see Judith Butler, *The Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009; repr., London; New York: Verso Books, 2016). Recent examples of labor issues in China include the discourses of "996 working hours in tech companies" and "migrant workers (*dagong ren*)" on Chinese social media, which are concerned with the vulnerability of people who engage in safe work, per Fussell's categorization.

[42] For the "reeducation camps" in the Uyghur region in China, see, for example, DISCDuke, "A Conversation about the Uyghur Genocide with Aydin Anwar," *Youtube*, last modified May 9, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2fdvppDWgk; Darren Byler, "Uyghur Dispossession, Culture Work and Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Global City," (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2018). For "one-child" policy, see Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

society."[43] It is not that the state power is complicit with the market, but that the state has actively imported the market and endowed it with so-called "Chinese characteristics" (*zhongguo tese* 中国特色) for the purpose of efficiently maneuvering the resources and labor on its land.[44]

In thinking back to the case of the Shanxi mining industry, it is not known to what extent the state learned about the local (sub)contracting system and attempted to regulate it, due to the lack of historical records on this particular topic. However, given the state's ambitions to accelerate the reforms, it is presumable that management and regulation in actual industrial practices were not given much priority as opposed to economic benefits. Further, the (sub)contracting system has existed for a long time in Chinese history, for varied needs in different fields. Prasenjit Duara's study on rural north China in the first decades into the 20th century discovered a similar operating system in the government administration, through which government functions like tax collection were subcontracted to certain intermediaries—whose services were often very predatory—on the local level.[45] In today's China, the state's political agendas are

---

[43] Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell, "Introduction: The Impact of Post-Mao Reforms on Family Life," in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 5.
[44] "Chinese characteristics" (*zhongguo tese* 中国特色) is a term commonly used in official documents in China. For example, the Chinese government calls the current socialist state mixed with capitalist tools like market is "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi* 中国特色社会主义). The key is to highlight the importance of localizing imported policies/tools in the Chinese context.
[45] Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

increasingly multi-fold, compared to the contexts in the early 20th century and at the start of the reform period. Not only economic ambitions, but polishing China's international image has increasingly become the major concern; obscured is the country's long-term reputation in labor exploitation and environmental extraction. Nonetheless, in this process of curating a clean, high-tech, and organized China, remnants from transitional times like (sub)contracting systems are yet to be regulated or eliminated through concrete actions. According to my interlocutors, the (sub)contracting system is still ubiquitous in many industries, typically urban construction. Unlike the global outsourcing system and supply chains which at least follow some regulations and receive some degree of protection (e.g. Apple in the US to Foxconn in China),[46] the (sub)contracting system described above, whether in the mining industry in the 1990s or persisting in today's Chinese economy, is managed in arbitrary terms, contingent on local context and agreements.

Nevertheless, rendering migrant workers disposable and invisible is just one part of the story. The next biopolitical scheme written by the Chinese state has been to push those sickened bodies back to where they come from, that is, their families in rural areas.

---

[46] This is partly because, different from less known construction and mine corporations in China, Apple and Foxconn, as leading members in the industry (technology and manufacture), are still concerned with their public images. Apple is subjected to the "Labor Law of PRC" when it enters the Chinese market as international capital. In Foxconn, there is quite systemic management, which also speaks to the state legal agendas. For example, Foxconn improved its building safety standards in 1996, following the issue of the Labor Law. See Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai, *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2020).

We will reflect upon this historical process by reviewing the broad social transformations in the past several decades. If the privatization of the mining industry has consequently reduced workers to bodies exposed to intensive dust and later sickened with black lung, the privatization in other sectors across Chinese society since the reform period then has left these patients uncared for. The past four decades, to some extent, have witnessed a process in which the state displaces its responsibilities of caring for sick workers on the market, on private medical resources, and the family. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the CCP has attempted to exercise "caring power" and function as a caring, socialist political leader.[47] Noticeably, caregiving, or more broadly, many social reproduction activities were taken up by the state. "Socialization of housework" (*jiawu laodong shehuihua* 家务劳动社会化) along with the agenda to free women's labor from their households, was in place.[48] Various categories of domestic work had their alternatives in the public spaces: if one becomes a member of a "work unit" (*danwei* 单位),[49] he/she would have designated

---

[47] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no.4 (1982): 777–95.
[48] Shaopeng Song 宋少鹏, "'Huijia' haishi 'beihuijia'?: Shichanghua guocheng zhong 'funv huijia' taolun yu zhongguo shehui yishi xingtai zhuanxing" "回家"还是"被回家"?: 市场化过程中"妇女回家"讨论与中国社会意识形态转型 [Retreating back Home Willingly or Being Unwillingly Sent Home?: Debates on 'Women-going-home' and the Ideological Transformation in the Course of Marketization in China], *Funv yanjiu luncong* 妇女研究论丛 [Collection of Women's Studies] 106, no. 4 (2011): 5–12, 26.
[49] A particular term in Chinese for one's workplace, including spaces where one actually works and where one can enjoy a variety of welfare facilities and services. It can be translated as "work unit." See Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Kevin Lin, "Work Unit" in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from*

spaces to eat meals (*shitang* 食堂), have their children looked after (*baoyuyuan* 保育院), take a shower (*zaotang* 澡堂), and receive medical treatment. All of these facilities were included in one's job package in a *danwei* as welfare services.

Yet, into the reform period, the state has regarded these care services as signs of the redundant, inefficient allocation of resources. At the back of this changing attitude about welfare facilities is the shifting overarching guideline across the nation. As Yan Yunxiang observes, in this stage, "values of market economy [have] become new dominating forces of family change in particular and social change in general."[50] One might also recall the famous quote by Deng: "development is the only paramount force" (*fazhan caishi ying daoli* 发展才是硬道理). Like the retreat from Keynesianism in the West, the Chinese state started realizing the imperative to transform the industries and institutions. The logic of the market started to penetrate the domain of social reproduction.

Here emerges a process I call the *privatization of care*. Into the 1990s, alongside the privatization of industrial production—with the mining industry as a typical example, as analyzed above—many resources that used to be considered as the public welfare

---

Mao to Xi, ed. Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2019), 331–334.

[50] Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 233.

have been pushed back to the private sphere, including medicine and education. The economic interests brought about by this process are at least two-fold. First, by dismantling its previous welfare services, a corporation was able to invest those resources (land, labor, money) into more profitable production. Second, since those necessary services were no longer available at their workplace, workers would have to seek help elsewhere. Then the rising industries relevant to social reproduction have additionally contributed to the national economic boom.

While most critiques concentrate on the privatization of the means of production, such privatization of care services is not adequately addressed.[51] The privatization of care (and of the family), however, has equally constituted major social transformations.[52] Relevant guiding principles were strategically weaved in the state claims. Deng's 1992 "Southern Tour Talks" (*nanfang tanhua* 南方谈话) has been acknowledged as a milestone that has accelerated the recovery from the 1989 Tiananmen Square event and deepened the degree of economic reforms undertaken since then.[53] While Deng's discussion on "whether the country was heading towards socialist or capitalist directions" (*xingshe haishi xingzi* 姓社还是姓资) gained much attention, his opinions about the function of the

---

[51] Shaopeng Song 宋少鹏, "Ziben zhuyi shehui zhuyi he funv: Weishenme zhongguo chongjian makesi zhuyi nvquan zhuyi pipan" 资本主义、社会主义和妇女: 为什么中国需要重建马克思主义女权主义批判 [Capitalism, Socialism, and Women: Why does China Needs to Rebuild Marxist Feminism], *Kaifang shidai* 开放时代 [Open Times], 12 (2012): 98–112.
[52] Yan, *Private Life*; Song, "Capitalism."
[53] "Southern Tour Talks" (*nanfang tanhua* 南方谈话) is also known as "*jiuer nanxun* 九二南巡" or "*Deng Xiaoping nanxun* 邓小平南巡."

family were considerably marginalized. To uncover this less visible privatizing process, it is helpful to review Deng's key ideas about the family:

> "The lessons from developed European countries prove that we cannot do without family, and family is a good thing (*hao dongxi* 好东西). Too much engagement in collective welfare services will cause social problems…in having more elderly people and an aging population. The state cannot afford it. Society cannot afford it. Then the problems will get increasingly serious. We need to maintain the family. Many elderly people depend on their families (*douhsi kao yijiayihu yanghuo de* 都是靠一家一户养活的). In our Chinese cultures, from Confucianism, one is obliged to support their elderly."[54]

By borrowing from both European experience and Chinese traditions, Deng has found a way to justify the state's delegation of caregiving responsibilities to the intimate sphere of the family. Although Deng's speech focused solely on the issue of an aging population, the central message was that care activities should be practiced more within the family in order to reduce the burden earlier laid on the state. Further, Deng's praise on Chinese people's devotion and attachment to their families can easily lead to the romanticized reading of such privatization.[55] Social issues, ambiguously, seem to find their solutions in particular cultural values. Certainly, this changing functionality of the family unit, as opposed to that of the state, would be further associated with governance

---

[54] Rong Leng 冷溶, Zuoling Wang 汪作玲, Jianqi Yan 阎建琪, and Huayuan Xiong 熊华源, ed, *Deng Xiaoping nianpu 1975–1997* 邓小平年谱 1975–1997 [A Chronicle of Deng Xiaoping 1975–1997] (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2004), 1338; also quoted in Song, "Capitalism."

[55] See, for instance, Yelin Sun 孙业礼, "Deng Xiaoping: 'Jiating shige hao dongxi' jianji Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhude deng lingdao ren youguan gongchandang ren ying ruhe duidai jiating de lunshu" 邓小平: "家庭是个好东西"——兼及毛泽东、周恩来、刘少奇、朱德等领导人有关共产党人应如何对待家庭的论述 [Deng Xiaoping: 'Family is a good thing.' Also with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De and Other Leaders' Expositions on How Communists Should Treat Families"], last modified January 6, 2014. http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n/2014/0106/c85037-24030270.html.

over individuals.[56] With welfare facilities cut down, Chinese citizens have had to adjust their expectations about being cared for by the state. But this process has been not easy and often lagged behind the state's actions. Based on my interviews, many black lung patients still hold socialist views about the state's obligations and expect to be cared for. Such socialist aspirations, in the past, partly sustained their work, yet now have turned into tragic disillusion. A shift from hope to despair is not uncommon among patients: "we contributed to the country's economic development, and now we are abandoned."

Deng's proposition on the family, shortly, aroused some discussions. In 1993, *People's Daily* published the article "Let the Corporations Go to the Market with Lighter Packs" (*rang qiye qingzhuang zouxiang shichang* 让企业轻装走向市场), arguing that corporations should not be burdened with social responsibilities and that welfare services should give way to the corporations' major function of earning profits through deeper reforms.[57] As opposed to those widespread socialist actions at the beginning of the PRC, a series of measures were implemented to separate different parts of social life. Production was recognized as work in the public sphere, while reproductive labor had to retreat to the private units of the family in the name of promoting traditional Confucian values and modern economic development. In today's Chinese society,

---

[56] Erin Elizabeth Thomason, "Obliged to Care: Rural Chinese Families, Migration, and the Changing Intergenerational Contract," (PhD diss., University of California: Los Angeles, 2017).
[57] "Rang qiye qingzhuang zouxiang shichang" 让企业轻装走向市场 [Let the Corporations Go to the Market with Lighter Packs], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily], last modified October 30, 1993, https://cn.govopendata.com/renminribao/1993/10/31/2/#917935.

despite the trend of individualization, traditional family values, obligations, and connections have tenaciously survived and even been strengthened.[58] This may be dissonant with the influx of neoliberal ideas, but it functions well in a practical sense, especially when it comes to the issues of caregiving. Regardless of the cover of Confucianism, what fundamentally happened to Chinese families has been a form of re-institutionalization.[59] People were once invited to embrace the socialization of the family and release their labor capacity from reproductive activities in the household. Yet, within just a few decades, before some managed to adjust their mindsets, people have been pushed back to take up domestic and caregiving tasks by themselves, even when the state is held accountable. This process, further, does not simply circle back to its starting point. Unlike the historical context in the early years of the PRC, there is a fierce necro-political, neoliberal capitalist system outside one's home, while the unit of family itself is never innocent.

For black lung patients, the retreats to their families in rural areas are more complex. They were floating population (*liudong renkou* 流动人口) in places they once worked for, where they had no shelters to stay, no access to medical resources, and no

---

[58] Yunxiang Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2009); Davis and Harrell, "Introduction: The Impact of Post-Mao Reforms on Family Life"; Jing Song and Yingchun Ji, "Complexity of Chinese Family Life: Individualism, Familism, and Gender," *China Review* 20, no. 2 (2020): 1–17.

[59] Deborah Davis and Sara L. Friedman, "Deinstitutionalizing Marriage and Sexuality," in *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China*, ed. Deborah Davis and Sara L. Friedman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 1–39.

protection from the local regulations. Their returns to homes accord with the above historical traces, but also manifest the state's abandonment of bodies that can no longer be productive. What is happening in those intimate, familial spaces? How do the patients' family members react to the consequences of an exploitative economy? How shall we listen to and reflect upon caregiving experiences of women caregivers, supplemental to patients' illness experience? In the next chapter, we will encounter Mei, a caregiver of many in her family and elsewhere, and try to understand what daily care practices mean for her, for those whose life has been haunted by the black lung disease, and, hopefully, for each of us who deals with care or lack of it every day.

3. Displaced Care

Mei is spending another Saturday afternoon with her little Feifei. While they are surrounded by all kinds of toys, Mei is also trying to impart some new knowledge to this two-year-old baby. At first, Mei slowly counts the number of teddy bears in front of them, "one, two, three!" hoping Feifei will understand her pedagogy and follow the counts. After several attempts, Mei decides that it might be better to start with the names of the items, so she slowly repeats the term "Xiong" ("bear" in Chinese) as she points at that stuffed animal. Usually this is Mei's favorite daily activity, during which she can maintain extraordinary patience and enthusiasm. But Saturday is the most stressful day of every week for Mei. As the sky turns darker, she constantly checks the time on her phone, wondering why her hosts are not home yet. Indeed, this is not Mei's home, and Feifei is not Mei's baby. Mei has been hired by Feifei's family as a nanny for Feifei, or a stand-in mother while her biological mother is not home. Finally, the hosts arrive home. Mei brings Feifei to them, shortly informs them about dinner and other household arrangements, and then leaves the house. After six days of being on call for 24 hours, Mei is now off work, but it is not yet time to relax or soothe her nerves. Mei is heading to her "second shift"—the similar types of work waiting to be done at her own house.[1]

---

[1] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking Adult, 1989).

Mei's week looks like this: Monday through Saturday, she stays with Feifei's family. She cooks and does housework. She looks after Feifei when her parents are out working during the day. Per her hosts' request, Mei also lives with their family. On Saturday afternoon, Mei is permitted to return home and stay in her own house for one night. Sunday afternoon marks the start of another week's work. Yet, on this "off work" day, Mei is busier than on her workdays. She has to do the laundry, feed the livestock, clean the house, farm the land, cook for her own family, bathe her eighty-year-old mother, and, most crucially, make sure everyone in her family is in stable health. Many women in China have to deal with a second shift comprising a significant amount of domestic work that is assumed to be primarily their responsibility.[2] Yet, Mei's second shift can be particularly intense: "It feels like all the work for the week has been condensed into one day." Further, Mei's work is less a personal choice—the way most women in urban China would identify their work—which would signal her autonomy

---

[2] This is still prominent according to recent studies on the Chinese family. See, for example, Jing Song and Yingchun Ji, "Complexity of Chinese Family Life: Individualism, Familism, and Gender," *China Review* 20, no. 2 (2020): 1–17; Jing Song and Weiwan Lai, "Cohabitation and Gender Equality: Ideal and Real Division of Household Labor among Chinese Youth," *China Review* 20, no. 2 (2020): 53–80. Xiao-yuan Dong and Xinli An, "Gender Patterns and Value of Unpaid Care Work: Findings from China's First Large Time Use Survey," Review of Income and Wealth 61, no. 3 (2015): 540–560; Tamara Jacka, Andrew B. Kipnis, and Saly Sargeson, *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change* (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

and independence,[3] than an imposition of obligations caused indirectly by the black lung disease that has sickened her husband's body for over a decade.

But Mei seldom complains, because she knows that her family lives a much better life than many other black lung families. Nor does she have the time. The only thing constantly on her mind is to "speed up."[4] This impulse to "speed up" has also penetrated our chats. Mei would call me while occupied with other tasks: cooking, walking, feeding the livestock, or even brushing her teeth. Often, she would just place the phone beside her, chatting with me as she continued her work. She would call me upon waking up on Sunday morning, when she had yet to start her busy day, lying in bed, often still in her pajamas, and enjoying a short chat with me. I appreciated these casual, unstructured chats with my interlocutors, as the communication patterns established between Mei and me facilitated a way for me to *re*-capture some degree of spontaneity and instantaneity that may be lacking in a digital fieldwork project. Certainly, we also had slow chats, which took place on those nights when Mei could not fall asleep or during the holidays when she finally had a relatively loose schedule. Those slow conversations turned into the sharing of each other's personal histories, while the "speed-up" chats became a channel through which I was able to squeeze into her life, accompany her in mundane moments, and grasp a sense of participating and being in

---

[3] See, for example, the urban women's understanding of work in Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).
[4] Hochschild, *The Second Shift*.

my field. It was through this rhythm of fast and slow communication—and every way in between—that Mei's personal narratives and daily quotidian life unfolded in front of me.

Two Families, Split Caregiver

While reports on black lung do sometimes recognize the burdens laid on women in patients' families, and specifically caregiving as a major part of their daily life, few detail what that means for the caregiver and care receiver, especially for a family that was already impoverished and sickened before black lung hit. Mei's husband was diagnosed with black lung in 2007, the tenth year of their marriage. After years of protests alongside his fellow miners Mei's husband now benefits from a local policy specifically set up for black lung patients in his county. Based on the assistance plan, he can receive free medical treatment in a designated hospital as well as monthly compensation of 300 yuan.[5] About three or four times a year, Mei's husband goes to stay

---

[5] Due to confidentiality concerns, I cannot disclose information about the specific location and policy. However, I want to elaborate on the costs and limitations of this type of local-based assistance. First, such success is not common across the country. The success of Mei's husband and his fellows resulted from many years of effort, during which patients were threatened or even treated violently. Some active participants in these protests died before seeing the release of the local assistance. Second, although it seemed that the local policy in Mei's husband's case would cover all black lung patients registered in the area, it ended up only benefiting those who were active in protests. People who later wanted to be included were mostly rejected for various reasons. The local policy itself, to some extent, turned out to be a form of "bribery" spent by the local to silence the protestors. Third, the free medical treatment comes with certain restrictions that cause great inconvenience to the patients. Only fees spent during hospitalization are covered; those generated during outpatient services cannot be included. In addition, for one particular type of medicine necessary for the treatment of black lung, patients can only take a small amount home after each hospitalization, which

at that hospital. Each stay lasts roughly a month. As his health condition has deteriorated, his hospital stays have grown longer, per his doctors' advice. While the family no longer needs to worry about medical expenses for Mei's husband, the impact of black lung has never fallen solely on the patients. Mei's younger son became addicted to video games and dropped out of school at an early age, partly because his mother paid more attention to his sick father and did not manage to watch him. For similar reasons, Mei's elder son, who has had a slight mental disability since he was very young, also dropped out and, ironically, became addicted to cigarettes. Mei's mother, although less relevant to the long-term effects of black lung, lost her ability to labor after undergoing surgery for cerebral hemorrhage years ago, and now lives with Mei's family. The younger son has left the village for restaurant work in a nearby city, while the elder son, 23, still lives at home after several futile attempts to hold down a job. Thus, an overview Mei's family situation shows that almost every member has been, directly or indirectly, influenced by the intrusion of black lung and forced to partly change their life trajectories. Except for the younger son, who has left the home and lives independently, Mei is the only member who is generally healthy and capable of working outside the family. Furthermore, she is the main caregiver whom everyone else relies on

---

can sustain them for merely 15 days or so. For patients who live far away from the hospital, this has led to many unnecessary trips and costs spent during each visit.

in their daily lives. On top of all of the care work in her own family, Mei's current job is to take care of another family.

My first impression of the interaction between Mei and Feifei was very different from the scene described above, on that stressful Saturday on which Mei behaved less like herself. I met Feifei before I met Mei's own family, during our first video chat. At that time, Mei was taking a walk with Feifei. When I asked the baby's name, Mei proudly replied, "Feifei," which surprised me, as it was not the baby's full name or first name, but a common nickname with reduplicated words that Chinese parents often call their children. As she was chatting with me over the phone, she was also closely watching Feifei walk around. While I could only see Feifei briefly, Mei's description immediately allowed me to imagine a two-year-old who had just learned to walk and was eager to explore, slowly and unsteadily, out of excitement and curiosity. And Mei, hired by the family as a nanny, displayed her mothering skills in the way she talked to the baby. She warmly cautioned Feifei to walk slower. She taught Feifei the names of the objects around them. She also taught Feifei to call an elderly lady *Taitai* (太太), which was apparently an attempt to educate Feifei to be polite from an early age.[6]

Such displays of motherhood continued to enrich my view of Mei as we had more chats, sometimes with Feifei present. Notably, Mei would teach Feifei everything

---

[6] *Taitai* is a respectful title that Chinese people call elderly women.

in Mandarin rather than the local dialect, even though she is less proficient in Mandarin and sometimes confuses the pronunciation. This part of Mei's pedagogy is not common in nearby cities/counties, where most people speak only the local dialect in their daily lives and even at school. It is an indication of Mei's hope for Feifei's future. Mei seems to have envisioned that Feifei will live and work somewhere outside their province, a place that is, except for its capital city, associated with backwardness and remoteness. On other occasions, as described above, Mei would try to teach Feifei, encouraging her to gain new knowledge, however trivial it might be. What Mei is trying to do exceeds the responsibilities of a traditional nanny. She acts like a mother to the little girl, especially when her biological mother is absent. Most of her actions involve hope and aspirations for Feifei's daily progress and future life. Mei's attachment to Feifei has also extended to the entire family, which in turn has led to a reciprocal relationship between Mei and her hosts. As Mei expressed during our first chat and consistently implied thereafter, "I think they are treating me as part of their family." In response to this sense of belonging, Mei is motivated to do more than a nanny is typically expected to do. Quite impressively, Mei sometimes brings a dozen eggs laid by the chickens in her courtyard to Feifei's family as a gift, despite the desperate financial straits of her own family.

This heartwarming relationship, however, casts a strong contrast to what I saw in Mei's own family. I clearly remember the feelings of embarrassment, confusion, and helplessness that struck me when, for the first time, my interlocutors started a fight right

in front of me (on the other side of the screen). In the beginning, Mei chided her son for some minor misbehavior at home. Her son talked back quite disrespectfully. Immediately, a small conflict that should have faded away quickly grew into a fierce argument. Chronic problems lurking in the family were brought up at once, triggering more anger on both sides. Mei scolded her son for not working, for not quitting smoking, for not helping with housework, and for treating his grandmother. Her son fought back, demeaning his parents by, for example, asking his father, "What do you think you can do (*ni you shenme benshi* 你有什么本事; *ni you shenme liaobuqi* 你有什么了不起)? My uncle has built a house. What do you have?" Even on relatively peaceful days, when Mei was at home, I most often heard her urging her son for small favors, in quite a "speed-up" manner: "Wei, close that door! Wei, lift that bucket! … Wei, shake that!" But most of the time, her son does not react positively to Mei's requests. Consequently, in contrast to the incredible patience that Mei shows when she takes care of Feifei, her son's indifference can easily trigger her anger and cause her to use terms like *zazhong* (杂种) and *chusheng* (畜生) toward her son, as she ends up doing most of the housework by herself with little assistance.[7]

[7] *Zazhong* (杂种) literally means "hybrid," "crossbreed," or "a species produced by the hybridization of different species or varieties." It is a curse word in Chinese, similar to words like "bastard" or "son of bitch" in English. *Chusheng* (畜生) literally means "domestic animal" and is often used to abuse people as "uncultivated" and "animal-like," similar to words like "beast" and "dirty swine." See the CNKI dictionary for their respective definitions and uses.
https://cidian.cnki.net/cidian/Search/SimpleSearch?Key=%E7%95%9C%E7%94%9F&range=CNKIDICT&sear

Notably, Feifei was frequently mentioned in these constant conflicts. Mei would, probably unconsciously, compare that little two-year-old baby from another family with her 23-year-old son, saying that "even Feifei would not behave like you (*doubuhui xiangni zheyang* 都不会像你这样)!" Because of her son's mental disability and incapacity to live independently, his actual age is not a helpful measurement for Mei to determine whether he has grown into an adult or is still a child. Rather, Mei's understanding of her son's status is based on a relationship of independence or dependence—a criterion more commonly used before the emergence of modern chronometry as well as when the assumed temporality loses its legitimacy.[8] One year ago, her son was offered a job in another province by the local Labor Service Bureau (*laowu ju* 劳务局), which gave Mei some hope that her son could eventually start a life on his own. Unfortunately, Mei's hope lasted only for around two weeks. Her son was fired without pay, because "he did not manage to make products of good quality." He was later taken to a construction site to perform some odd jobs and was promised daily payments. However, on his third day there, his fingers were severely hurt in an accident, because he forgot to wear gloves before touching cement. His attempts to hold a job ended with some injuries and very

chtype=Entryword, (accessed March 6, 2021). Note that Mei also embarrasses or demeans herself when she uses these words toward her son, whether consciously or not.

[8] Akhil Gupta, "Reliving Childhood? The Temporality of Childhood and Narratives of Reincarnation," *Ethnos* 67, no. 1 (2002): 33–55.

little pay. Mei's hope, also, quickly vanished and turned into deep worries about her son's future. In addition, Mei is also desperately concerned about her son's addiction to smoking. When Mei is not at home, her son will trick or threaten his grandmother for money. Once he gets a bit of money, it immediately transforms into a pack of cigarettes (which are usually cheap, low-quality ones). Mei fears that misfortune may befall her son, more specifically, her son's lungs, after years of smoking: "If you are sick, how can you afford the treatment? Smoke, smoke…why do I have a child like you? Quit! Quit! Otherwise you are just waiting for death (*dengsi* 等死)…if you do not quit, nobody is gonna give you a penny. Get out of my house (*nigeiwo gun chuqu* 你给我滚出去)!"

"He always makes me feel sad." This was Mei's first reaction when I asked about her son in our early chats. I was taken aback, as I had naively assumed that Mei was luckier than other women in black lung families, with two grown sons to assist her. I had yet to learn what black lung has caused in most families: an expansive series of traumas that affect each family member in a particular way. In Mei's family, it has further intensified existing crises, especially the uncertain future of her elder son. With our conversations progressing and both of us revealing more vulnerability, I started to recognize the complexity of Mei's emotions. As acknowledged by the literature on care, embodiment is inevitably key to activities that intimately encounter bodies in illness,

suffering, and disability.[9] Mei's worries, which have been growing denser and bigger over the past decade, have been deeply embodied and become part of her. Mei told me, "My elder son is the major source of my anxiety. He is my *xinbing* (心病)." *Xinbing*, which literally means a disease in one's heart, is usually used to describe longstanding problems that are intractable yet linger in and trouble one's mind. Mei's concerns have been incorporated into her body and cause her constant unease.

Her high-strung nerves have made Mei unusually sensitive to what happens around her. Especially with her son, each small, unpleasant moment may remind her of the lasting traumatic experience, her unmanageable problems, the family's uncertain future, and the fear of losing her beloved ones to lung diseases.

Moreover, Mei's anger, despair, and fear are intermingled with her caring personality and motherhood, which sometimes appear as a form of self-blame and self-criticism:

> "I was really stupid (*wo zhende hensha de* 我真的很傻的). I gave birth to my elder son at home. I did not go to the hospital. When he was born, he had a red birthmark, with a blood streak, on his right instep. A doctor later found that his birth mark was angioma. Then they did surgery on him, using general anesthesia. It was probably this surgery that caused his mental disability. He was only three years old. And we [Mei and her husband] really knew nothing about the surgery and his disease. He is 23 years old, but he cannot do calculations as simple as three plus four. He cannot live independently, either… Now he stays at

---

[9] See, for instance, Steven P. Black, "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Care," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (2018): 79–95; Marjorie Harness Goodwin and Asta Cekaite, *Embodied Family Choreography: Practices of Control, Care, and Mundane Creativity* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Kristin Elizabeth Yarris, "'Pensando Mucho' ('Thinking Too Much'): Embodied Distress Among Grandmothers in Nicaraguan Transnational Families," *Cultural Medical Psychiatry* 38, no. 3 (2014): 473–98.

> home, but what about the future? How can he live alone [if we are gone], and how can he find someone to take care of him?"

In addition to scolding her son with humiliating terms, Mei would easily lose her patience and temper at home. Her bursts of emotion, however, mainly reflect her internal struggles, which, unlike her aggressive external expressions, often involves harshly attacking herself. For Mei, the embodiment of pain, death, disability, and declining health has permeated every care activity that she engages in with her own family. Where can those burdensome embodiments find relief? Some turn into outbursts toward others, but most come back toward her, mixing with complex emotions and circling around and around. At once, embodiment serves to challenge the dyadic division between the external and internal worlds of Mei's body, and between Mei's body and mind.

Having analyzed the interactions between Mei and her elder son, now I want to turn to Mei's relationship with her sick husband, and slightly shift from Mei's identity as a mother to that as a wife. I confess that my interpretation of their relationship has experienced many twists and fluctuations over time. However, when it comes to observing someone's family life, I would argue that we should embrace these changes as well as the inevitable ambiguity. Such ambiguity lies in the fact that, on the one hand, the family is the basic unit where the state practices its governance and applies its political ideology, and thus where each member's actions are already altered by external forces; and, on the other hand, family is a private space normally open only to its

insiders, as opposed to the public sphere, serving as a shelter to which its members can build belonging and attachment. Studies on the family in China are no less troubled by the imbalance of these two different understandings. Overemphasis on the family as a mechanical, functional social unit subjected to state governance risks neglecting the agency of members within the family and leaving their intimate, everyday life details unexamined.[10] Envisioning the family as a space full of care and love, however, may romanticize it as an autonomous domain in isolation from the overarching governance.

The story of Mei and her husband demands readings from both perspectives. Love was what I initially perceived from Mei's narratives. Recalling her husband's early life in the mining industry, Mei, to my surprise, first brought up how they met each other at the mine site, fell in love, and then started a family. While it was precisely their early life in the mines that led to their current family dilemma, the source of the dust that has sickened her husband for a decade was curiously associated first with a romantic story. Love was also expressed through small, caring actions. When staying in the hospital, Mei's husband would save money, by ordering cheaper food, to buy his wife some gifts. In our chats, he also frequently expressed his gratitude and appreciation for Mei's contribution to the family. Many of Mei's social media posts reflect moments of happiness in their daily life. Certainly, they sometimes argue with each other. Her

---

[10] Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), xi–xii.

husband would say, "You should just go and find someone else." His wife would complain, "What did I get from marrying you? Nothing!" Yet, these frictions would shortly fade away, and neither would take it seriously. Upon explaining her choice to stay, Mei said to me,

> "If I leave, how miserable his life will be. He will be a homeless person. He may move back in with his mother. But they do not have a house. Then he will have to stay at his brother's place. Would they treat him very well? How would that do any good for his health condition? Forget it. I will do what I can (*wo jin wode nengli ba* 我尽我的能力吧). As long as he is here, I will take care of him."

Yet, how can we understand the mutual care between Mei and her husband, and to what extent can it support them in their daily struggles? At first glance, Mei's husband seems to embrace forms of "caring masculinity," which, as Karla Elliott defines it, essentially involves "the rejection of domination and the integration of values derived from the realm of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality."[11] This optimistic view of seemingly egalitarian forms of gender expression, however, also manifests in some contexts as the broadening of traditional hegemonic masculinity.[12] In the example of domestic work, despite its kind appearance, "a caring masculinity" may end up strengthening the gender division of labor in the household. To some extent, Mei's husband repeats what the state ideology and social structure have attempted to

---

[11] Karla Elliott, "Caring Masculinities: Theorizing an Emerging Concept," *Men and Masculinities* 19, no. 3 (2016), 240.

[12] Sarah C. Hunter, Damien W. Riggs, and Martha Augoustinos, "Hegemonic Masculinity versus a Caring Masculinity: Implications for Understanding Primary Caregiving Fathers," *Social & Personality Psychology Compass* 11, no. 3 (2017), 1–9.

impose on women, further reinforcing the assumption that domestic work is women's responsibility. It may also facilitate what feminist scholars term the "family myth," in which the wife does most of the work while the husband engages in small tasks or stands by and expresses appreciation.[13] The situation in Mei's family is, certainly, different from the "gender coercion" in families where husbands are able and healthy, but it—however passively—binds Mei more deeply to her obligations.[14] More crucially, due to the instability of chronic diseases like black lung, Mei has been drawn into a constant rhythm of hope and despair. She likes having her husband at home, as he can give her emotional support and at times help with some domestic work, but she would desperately urge her husband to go to the hospital if there were any sign of deterioration of his condition. For an incurable disease, death is implied at the moment of diagnosis. Yet, the chronicity makes the situation uncertain, thus generating significant anxiety for both patients and caregivers who know that death is approaching and can only prolong the process. With the certainty of death hanging over Mei and her husband, the mutual care, unfortunately, only sustains their daily lives in limited and unstable ways.

We may now turn our gaze back to Mei and Feifei's family. Despite the burdens, pain, and uncertainties in her own family, Mei always smiles again when speaking of Feifei and the many delightful moments she has shared with this sweet baby. For Mei,

---

[13] Hochschild, 1989.
[14] Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Feifei's family is where she embraces hope and happiness. Such differences are based on comparisons between her own family and Feifei's family, but also on her current nanny job and her previous work elsewhere. Two years before, Mei was a temporary worker at construction sites, where she had a variety of duties, including grocery shopping, cooking, and even carrying heavy buckets of cement. After a minor injury, she shifted to taking care of elderly people for one of her relatives—a category of work that, as Julia Twigg has explored, usually involves intimate body work that may engender feelings of discomfort and low self-esteem on the part of caregivers.[15] The contrast between her previous jobs, the endless responsibilities at home, and the liveliness introduced by Feifei has made Mei cherish her nanny work even more. She told me that,

> "Taking care of babies gives me hope. Elderly people might pass away soon and suddenly, but babies will grow up...I have been working for Feifei's family for one year and two months. When I started there, Feifei could not speak yet, and she did not want to stay with me…now she can say so many words, and we are becoming closer and closer. She sometimes calls me grandma!"

Switching between her own home and her employer's home each week, Mei's caregiving in the former feels like more of a burden, while her work in Feifei's home has gradually become a means of self-care. Yet, this cyclical healing process sometimes plays out in a curious way. Mei once mentioned an interesting—yet bitter—moment:

> "Sometimes I phone my elder son many times a day. I know he is running around, not staying at home and looking after his grandma. I scold him over the phone. Once Feifei heard me talking on the phone, and said, 'Wei is not well-

[15] Julia Twigg, "Carework as a Form of Body Work," *Ageing and Society* 20, no. 4 (2000), 389–411.

> behaved (*bu tinghua* 不听话). Get a pole and beat him (*na ge gangan da ta* 拿个杆杆打他)!' How funny! You never know where Feifei learns this stuff. Then after Feifei's parents got home from work, she said this again to her parents. They were also amazed by Feifei's language learning…"

It was, in part, a moment that showed how Mei had to struggle with and balance care work in two places in her daily life—staying in Feifei's home while worrying about the situation in her own family. Yet, Feifei's little joke briefly cheered her up, and this moment of happiness was further augmented when Feifei's parents were similarly amused and amazed by Feifei's new knowledge.

Recently, in quite an ecstatic mood, Mei told me that Feifei's parents wanted her to continue staying with their family, as Feifei's mother was pregnant again and they wanted Mei to take care of their new baby. Mei describes her job as a nanny in Feifei's home as "safe," "hopeful," and "happy." It is a sweet home, which is such an improvement compared to her earlier work at the construction sites. While she has to stay outside of her home most of the time, watching Feifei grow up, learn to walk, and grasp new words has rewarded her with optimism. Happiness might be momentary, as when Feifei tells a joke or calls Mei grandma; yet these small, lighthearted moments can re-energize Mei and fill her with the strength to keep up her daily efforts to support her own family's health and future.

Happy Nanny There, Care Drain Here

While I appreciate what Mei has achieved in her work at Feifei's house, it is also important to recognize how Mei's perception of her nanny job is a rosy picture that

covers up many latent risks and the exploitative nature of the employment relationship. Many of Mei's experiences have alluded to her ambiguous, passive position in Feifei's family. Technically she has been hired by the family, and she only needs to do what she is asked, that is, perform housework and watch Feifei when her parents are not at home. Yet, unlike many other categories of manual labor, domestic work and caregiving have always been relational practices, with relationships built between nannies and host families via ubiquitous exchange and human touch.[16] Living in the same house or right next door to the hosts may signify an entrance to another family's most intimate life or even an invitation to be part of them; various domestic labor activities have given Mei access to information about the family's daily routines and habits. Doing the laundry can lead to knowledge about a family's consumption structure and even the scent of each family member's sweat or cosmetics. It is corporal labor involving the indirect touch of others' skin. Cooking meals, a fundamental and essential task, is where Mei has some creativity and autonomy. Here she might leave some personal marks and—in a reverse of the typical pattern—change the family as an outsider. Although limited by meal times and the food budget, Mei can determine what the family eats as well as introduce her own preferences into the existing meal structure.

[16] Clare L. Stacey, *The Caring Self: The Work Experiences of Home Care Aides* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2011).

Throughout these intimate care activities and different forms of embodiment, Mei's role in Feifei's family is rather fluid. She can be a nanny. She can be a friend. She can also be a family member. However, similar to most nannies' dilemma, Mei constantly shifts and navigates between these roles. It is also doubtful whether she can be purely a nanny or purely a family member. Her work is care in action and care through constant adjustments. As Pierrette Hongdagneu-Sotelo notes, "Domestic work, especially when it involves child care, produces relationships that fall somewhere between family and employment yet are often regarded as neither."[17] Further, this fluid status has opened up a broad space for a different rhetoric, based on needs in varied contexts. Mei's feelings for the family also fluctuate and twist accordingly, following the "feeling rules" in the case of domestic work. According to Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Feeling rules are what guide emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges…it is a way of describing how…we intervene in feelings in order to shape them."[18]

On some occasions, Mei does hear or sense that she is "part of their family," especially when her hosts are satisfied with her contributions. Yet, this fantasy can easily vanish when the hosts praise her with words that remind her of her identity as a nanny

---

[17] Pierrette Hongdagneu-Sotelo, "Blowups and Other Unhappy Endings," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, eds. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 67.

[18] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 56–7.

(e.g., “You are just so much better than our last nanny!”), or when they are involved in negotiations about working hours and duties. Where to draw the line between a good and caring nanny and a nanny who has reached too far is largely at her hosts’ discretion, rather than Mei’s own. That line can be fluid, too, but wherever it is drawn, Mei does not seem to be the one who benefits from this relationship. When Mei’s role inclines toward being a family member, “the boundaries between paid work and unpaid favors” get blurred.[19] Extra obligations are instantly assumed, such as Mei bringing eggs from her own house as gifts. She also bites her tongue when Feifei’s parents arrive home later than the agreed upon time. Even if this delays the work at her own house, she tends to view the situation from her hosts’ perspective, just as she does for her own family members. However reciprocal these small favors may seem, they essentially reinforce Mei’s exploited status, with material costs in some cases. When Mei’s role inclines toward just being a nanny, her attachment to her hosts, and, more importantly to Mei, her attachment to Feifei, are considerably harmed. Spending most of her time with Feifei —much more than with her own family members—and watching Feifei make small progress every day have facilitated Mei’s affection for and attachment to a family that is not her own. As Mei’s emotional investments grow, there is an increased risk that such

[19] Hongdagneu-Sotelo, “Blowups,” 67.

complex attachments intermingled with an unequal employment relationship may eventually turn sour.

Many studies on nannies' lives have noted such an unstable, ambiguous process, shifting back and forth from "this is just like another family of mine, and I am also a mom of this baby" to "okay, I am just a nanny then."[20] This dynamic may result in a long accumulation of small frictions and, at a certain point, an abrupt blowup. Within the seemingly rosy picture, Mei's relationship with her hosts is not that safe; I gradually learned how many compromises and sacrifices Mei has made to avoid arguments and to maintain an amicable relationship. Mei is paid 3,000 yuan a month, lower than the rate in many other places around China.[21] At first, Mei did not want to live in Feifei's house. Her own house is around 20 minutes away, and she could easily commute between the two places every day. But, after many negotiations, the hosts won out by offering a slight increase (some hundred yuan) to her salary.

As Mei's daytime work has extended to the overnight hours and, indeed, to most of her time, Mei's own family has had to struggle with a severe "care drain."[22] None of Mei's family members can fully take on the work in their household, due to their

---

[20] Hongdagneu-Sotelo, "Blowups."

[21] Searches on related websites (e.g., 51baomu.com) reveal that most nannies in Mei's province have much higher salaries. On average workers are paid 4,000-5,000 yuan per month. Notably, a nanny who lives in is usually paid even better than others.

[22] Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Love and Gold," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, eds. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 17.

respective health problems. When Mei arrives home, work is waiting to be done, and she must find a way to squeeze it all into a single day. During our video chats, I have seen withered plants in Mei's yard, eggs waiting to be gathered, and dirty water in the livestock's drinking trough. In addition to the large pile of housework, Mei is most concerned with her husband's illness. This year, Mei's husband has developed pleurisy, a complication of black lung. His lungs hurt every time he inhales and exhales, and the pain killer injection he relies on is available only at the hospital. For the past five months, he has spent most of his time in a hospital far away from their home. Mei has worried because her husband's disease was most likely to deteriorate during the long winter. But she could not keep her husband company for even one day because of her nanny work. The year before last, a doctor suggested Mei stay with her husband in the hospital, as his condition was quite severe and he could not handle it without assistance. For most other hospital stays, however, Mei's husband has had to take care of himself. Mei told me that she would prefer to earn less money but have more flexibility in her schedule, just as she would prefer to return home every day. However, does Mei really have any choice, since she is so desperate for this "safe," "hopeful," and "happy" work?

Apart from actual income, Mei highly values the immaterial reward of "emotional capital," which has made her nanny job largely satisfying.[23] It should be noted, however, that Mei's affection for Feifei and the hope she experiences from Feifei's growth are alienated from their origins and destinations. Like the dilemma that has troubled many nannies who migrate from the Third World to the First World for better-paying jobs, Mei has, to some extent, displaced her care and love for her own family onto people in another family.[24] Mei's experience is a miniature version of transnational marketized reproductive labor; instead of the international division of labor, the relationship between Mei and her hosts manifests the class division of labor, or the urban-rural division of labor.[25] Being stuck in between the original world and the new world is a dilemma that Mei shares with nannies around the globe. As described above, Mei often expresses how excited she is about Feifei's new achievements. By contrast, Mei is bitter when talking about her own children. She laments that her sons are not as obedient as Feifei. She also regrets her negligence. As the primary caregiver for another young child, Mei seems to be trying to make up for her mistakes and to offer Feifei what she was not able to offer her own children. It is, ultimately, a fetishized attachment.[26]

---

[23] Helga Nowotny, "Austria: Women in Public Life," in *Access to Power: Cross-National Studies of Women and Elites*, eds. Cynthia Fuchs Epstein and Rose Laub Coser (London; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981).
[24] Hochschild, "Love and Gold."
[25] Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (1986; repr., London: Zed Books, 2014).
[26] Hochschild, "Love and Gold," 26.

Moreover, if this nanny work has ignited Mei's aspirations for a better life, and she sees it as a solution to her family's dilemma, the solution can easily circle back to the cause of the problem. In retrospect, Mei's family's current predicament can be viewed as caused—via "the butterfly effect"—by her husband's decision to work in the mining industry. It was the place where years of exposure to concentrated dust sickened him with black lung, and his lack of a labor contract made his fight for compensation extremely difficult. Fundamentally, Mei's position in a sweet home is no different than her husband's early job. Mei never signed a labor contract with Feifei's parents. Unlike nannies hired by companies or agencies, the success of Mei's employment relationship relies on oral promises rather than legal documents. Mei was introduced to her hosts by one of her relatives. Arguably, Mei's hosts pay less than they would if they had hired someone from an official agency, which charges agency fees but offers legal labor contracts for nannies. The convenience granted to the hosts intensifies the unprotected status of Mei's work. From Mei's description, Feifei's parents have decent jobs in government offices and are friendly to everyone. I do not doubt that there exists an amicable or even familial relationship between employer and employee. Nonetheless, without a labor contract, their relationship is essentially unequal and unbalanced, as the space for negotiation is highly contingent on the employer's concerns. If Feifei's parents want to end the employment, what can Mei do, and what kinds of assistance can she resort to? If Mei gets injured while working in their home, who will be held

accountable? For Mei, all of this is uncertain. Ironically, in the context of the Chinese political economy, black lung patients' bodies have been taken as disposable,[27] while the "solutions" that their family members have been left with to counter such disposability entail further engagement in unprotected labor.

Mei's optimism and aspirations remind me of what so many black lung patients and/or their family members have told me: "I did not know the dust at the mines would make me sick. I did not know I needed protection. I did not know a labor contract would be so important. If I knew, why would I accept a job like that? I am so regretful…" It might be true that working as a nanny in a household is a much safer job with significantly less risk of severe harm to Mei's health. But, certainly, whether Mei needs to exercise her rights and whether Mei holds those rights are completely different questions. Based on my ethnographic research, most migrant workers only realize the importance of a labor contract in hindsight. Workers may only think of it after they have lost their rights and caught certain diseases. The deep root of the problem is, additionally, that labor protection in China has barely improved over the past decades. As illustrated in chapter 2, it is an environment in which workers can easily be fired if they request a labor contract. Ultimately, while Mei has yet to embody the precariousness of her current uncontracted labor, her engagement with the job—and

---

[27] Neferti X. M. Tadiar, "Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (2013): 19–48.

ironically, her embodiment of hope from this job—has become the very site for reproduction of disparity and uncertainty.[28]

Has Mei's situation constituted a form of "cruel optimism," which, as defined by Lauren Berlant, "exists when something [she] desire[s] is actually an obstacle to [her] flourishing"?[29] Partially, yes. There is a complex of "cruel optimism"—the desire for "an enabling object that is also disabling"—in Mei's everyday life and decade-long odyssey with black lung alongside other consequences of this chronic, incurable disease.[30] Her husband's care may manifest as a form of "caring masculinity," which is capable of offering Mei psychological support while also, equivocally, drawing her deeper into family obligations without considering her individual needs. The care she receives from Feifei's family has trapped Mei into a middle ground between being a family member and being a nanny. Furthermore, seeing an uncontracted job—however decent and heartwarming it may seem—as the solution to her family's predicament brings Mei full circle back to its cause. It has essentially involved Mei more deeply in the "invisible economy" sector and rendered her hope and optimism less tenable.[31]

Nevertheless, while I acknowledge "cruel optimism" as a useful concept to think about Mei's experience, I am skeptical of its distancing perspective and the effects

---

[28] Felicity Aulino, *Rituals of Care: Karmic Politics in an Aging Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).
[29] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.
[30] Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," *differences* 17, no. 3 (2006), 21.
[31] Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalized Economy* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 31.

implied in this kind of conceptualization. Notably, Berlant's theory is not based on conversations with workers but mainly on "middle-class depictions" of this particular group.[32] She correctly points out the structural inequality and violence imposed on the working-class, who barely possess something termed life and are rather experiencing a "slow death" and the desire for "a less-bad life" (rather than a better one).[33] Yet, this perspective may turn out to be self-canceling because of the distance it maintains from workers' lived experience as analysis from the standpoint of an onlooker. What is absent is workers' own subjectivity and agency, and what "cruel optimism" means for them, not for theorists or anthropologists. I hope that the above analysis has shown not only the cruelty of one individual's daily endeavors with black lung but also the delicacy of all the efforts to cancel that cruelty. Last but not least, however cruel and fetishized Mei's hope is, hope is hope. It is a thing in itself. It drives vitality and actions. If a disease like black lung connotes uncertainty, hope then "suggests a willingness to embrace uncertainty and also serves as a concrete method for keeping knowledge moving in conditions of uncertainty."[34] In the next chapter, through another caregiver's story, we will see further how this moving knowledge can be translated from mundane care activities.

---

[32] Will Cooley, "Cruel Optimism," *American Studies* 52, no. 3 (2013): 79–80.
[33] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 42, 179–80.
[34] Hirokazu Miyazaki, "The Economy of Hope: An Introduction," in *The Economy of Hope*, eds. Hirokazu Miyazaki and Richard Swedberg (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 8.

4. Radicalized Care

My first chat with Yun started with COVID-19. This was unsurprising, given the special timing of me conducting most of my interviews. Usually, people would ask me about the situation in the US, and those who were most skeptical of the Chinese state media news reports would be particularly interested in confirming if what they had learned was in line with reality. Yun, however, surprised me by her political sensitivity and her candor in expressing political opinions. Yun's political views, further, have shown a curious bifurcation. When I complained about how difficult it was to get back to China, due to unreasonable flight prices, restrictive border policies, and complicated pandemic-related requirements, Yun firmly suggested to me, "For now you should just stay there and take good care of yourself. The country (*zuguo* 祖国) will bring you back soon. You see, they have this plan and have already brought some students back." It has been half a year, and what Yun took to be the state's promises, unsurprisingly, did not happen. Indeed, her strong trust in the country's obligation to protect its people seemed quite incomprehensible to me. She, her husband, who was diagnosed with black lung about a decade ago, and her other family members have barely received protection or care from the state. Except that students are always assumed to be more protected, where did her confidence come from?

Yun's belief in the state quickly turned into furious criticism, however, when our topic of conversation shifted to Li Wenliang—the whistleblower who tried to spread the

word that a suspicious virus had just been discovered in Wuhan and who was later arrested by the police for "disturbing social order" (*raoluan shehui zhixu* 扰乱社会秩序). Yun painted herself as an ally of Li. She had been following Li since the very early stages, frequently sharing relevant information about Li on her social media. Alongside her appreciation was her anger about the state's and people's neglect of Li: "Have you seen the show 'Heroes in Harm's Way'?[1] It did not mention Li in the entire series! I did not see people talk about him on news shows either. Also, nobody mentioned the healthcare workers who were infected on the frontlines, like Li. Everything is so fake!" Following her expression of trust in the state's promises, Li immediately showed something else—her anger about how the state had treated a hero-like figure unfairly. This bifurcation of Yun's perception of the state's performance has echoed what Lianjiang Li considered "subtle variations" that complicate people's trust in the state.[2] It is likely that Yun has lost confidence in one dimension or issue yet maintains confidence in others. Still, how does this happen? To what extent have Yun's personal experiences shaped her political understandings? My curiosity in this seemingly irrelevant chat in my early communication with Yun grew over time and later became key to my

[1] "*Zuimei nixing zhe*" 最美逆行者 [Heroes in Harm's Way], China Media Group (CMG), 2020, TV Series. This is the first TV show on the topic of the COVID-19 frontline workers in Wuhan, created and produced by China Media Group (CMG).
[2] Lianjiang Li, "The Magnitude and Resilience of Trust in the Center: Evidence from Interviews with Petitioners in Beijing and a Local Survey in Rural China," *Modern China* 39, no. 1 (2013): 3–36.

understanding of her life as a wife, a mother, and, most crucially, a creative and radical caregiver.

Chain of Burdens

Yun's husband has been afflicted by black lung for nearly a decade, after six years of working in the local mines. Back in the 1990s and early 2000s, mining was the major lucrative industry in their county, where mineral resources were once abundant. Then, in the 2010s, the once-welcomed mining jobs that had pulled many families out of poverty turned into a nightmare. Like many other places around China, the mines in Yun's county have been drying up and job opportunities have been decreasing. An increasing number of ex-miners have found themselves sickened with severe lung diseases. Upon learning about the relationship between the mysterious emergence of the disease and their previous occupation, patients in the county started petitioning the local government for compensation. In most cases, as introduced in chapter 2, black lung patients could not get their deserved compensation, because they had difficulty proving their previous employment relationship; usually, miners would not discover their disease until years after they had returned to their homes (which are often far away from their workplace), by which time the mines might have been abandoned, and their previous employers might have left the area. The situation that Yun's husband and his fellow miners face is different. It is clear, medically, that their lung diseases have been

caused by long-term exposure to concentrated dust in their workplace, and that, historically, most of these patients only worked in the local mines and no place else.

However, such clear reasons, which seemed to justify people's request for compensation, were complicated by the change in ownership of the local mines. Most local mines were possessed by private owners during the peak of the mining industry. Yet, in 2006, as part of the nationwide publicization of mining resources,[3] the local government confiscated most mines and then sold them by auction. This change in ownership has made it almost impossible for the county's black lung patients to hold anybody accountable. Whomever they turn to—the old or new owners—they would be pushed to the other side. After many futile attempts, the patients agreed that the local government is their employer, or at least, the local government should be responsible. This claim hinges on the fact that the local government can manipulate property ownership, and on the stories they have heard from elsewhere about black lung patients occasionally getting compensated by their local governments.

Collective compensation requests and petitions shortly began to spring up, pressuring the county government to address their issues directly. In 2014, the county

---

[3] In 1998, the Chinese state released the closure policy for township- and village-owned enterprises (TVEs) around the country. The decision resulted from concerns about prominent issues that had occurred at those private properties, including environmental damage, a high accident rate, and low production efficiency. Yet, the policy was not uniformly put into practice in many places. Many TVEs were still in operation in the early 2000s. See Huaichuan Rui, *Globalization, Transition and Development in China: The Case of the Coal Industry* (London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 71–73.

finally released an assistance policy for black lung patients, which offered to cover medical expenses related to the disease and to pay a small monthly pension. However, the implementation of this policy has been arbitrary. The number of beneficiaries is limited; only selected patients are included. According to Yun, many of those included patients are relatives of local officials or have developed close connections with the government. Yun's family was rejected for the reason of late submission, despite the fact that the local government had never officially announced the application procedures.

Yun's struggles for compensation, however, only comprise a small part of her life. Since her husband caught the disease and has become less capable of physical work, Yun has taken on most of their family responsibilities. She is, certainly, a caregiver for her husband. She is also a laborer who takes care of their farmland; although the land is small, it is their main source of income.[4] If her husband remains in stable health, Yun does some temporary work at construction sites. Sometimes she can find work near their home, but in most cases, Yun has to travel to a distant location and stay there for a

---

[4] Yun and her husband's marriage is matrilocal. They moved where Yun's big family was located because of better conditions than in her husband's place of origin. However, Yun did not inherit any property from her parents. All the land was given to the sons in the family rather than the daughters. The land that Yun currently farms and benefits from has been offered by her elder brother as a gift to assist while Yun's family is in financial straits. The property issues in Yun's family reflect the situation in many families in rural China. See, for example, Yuqin Huang, *Transforming the Gendered Organisation of Labour and Leisure: Women, Labour, Leisure and Family in Lianhe Village, Central China, 1926-2013* (Singapore: Springer; [China]: ECUST Press, 2020); Tamara Jacka, Andrew B. Kipnis, and Sally Sargeson, *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change* (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2013). However, we may also note how ironic this act of gifting is. Owning part of the land should be Yun's birthright, yet she was able to retrieve it, with the permission of a male in her family, only when her husband was severely sick (Nicole Barnes, Written Comments, April 7, 2021).

couple of months, leaving her husband at home. She sustained a severe injury in an accident last year through her work at the construction sites and she suffers from the chronic disease of lumbar disc herniation. On top of these responsibilities, Yun is a mother of two children. As we saw in Mei's story, black lung disease can indirectly cause estrangement between family members. Yun's younger child, a son, is only 17 years old, but has dropped out of school and migrated to a southeastern province to start a job in a restaurant there. Her elder child, a daughter, in Yun's words, "is disobedient and has no place in [her] heart."

Here we may zoom in on the relationship between Yun and her daughter, which further illustrates how an incurable disease like black lung can radically affect family dynamics. Since black lung invaded her family, Yun has had to focus most of her attention on her husband's health condition and on resolving their financial burdens. Yun recalls thinking, "How will I be able to spare any time for my children? Everything around black lung just exhausted my energy." Instead of attending to what her daughter might need in her coming of age, Yun was eagerly waiting for her daughter to mature and start shouldering some responsibilities. Yun said to her daughter, "Your dad has devoted his whole life to our family, to you and your brother. If not for you two, he need not have worked so hard and contracted the disease." Yet, according to Yun, her daughter reacted to her words with indifference. More surprisingly, it seemed Yun's efforts had severely backfired. Yun's daughter became very rebellious and made every

attempt to flee the home. She dropped out—which, again, is very common among children in black lung families —and spent most of her time wandering around with her friends. Just as Mei's elder son's reliance on cigarette, Qun's daughter seemed to find alcohol as a tool to soothe her nerves. She often got drunk and still refused to go home. If Yun found her and brought her back home, she would soon run away again. The conflicts between mother and daughter continued to escalate, and they never got to sit down and communicate. Not long into this painful "catch and run away" cycle, Yun's daughter simply left the county in which she had lived for nearly 20 years and started a job in a distant city. Moreover, she did so without any notice to her family. After leaving the area, Yun's daughter even blocked her mother's phone number for a year.

Although, fortunately, Yun and her daughter have been in touch again in the last year, and her daughter even planned to return home at Chinese New Year with a few thousand yuan to support the family, Yun's memories of this difficult time with her daughter remain rather traumatic. When our chats mentioned her daughter, she often started with words like, "You know, she is a very rebellious person." Yun would also become extremely anxious if her daughter did not answer her phone calls, even for fair reasons, as though the past had returned. Now Yun has a different strategy than before, however. She has learned to view her daughter as a friend rather than a family member who needs to be urged to take on responsibilities. She has come to understand generational differences and has gradually accepted her daughter's individualistic

pursuits and lifestyle. She has also picked up some new ideas. As one surprising example, when asked about marriage, Yun replied, "If I could choose again, I would not choose marriage. I would be fine alone as long as I could support myself. If my daughter does not want to get married, I would not give her any advice against that." Her daughter, after years of attempting to escape her original family, has now returned and started carrying some burdens for her mother. After a long struggle of trying not to be a woman like her mother or follow her mother's wishes,[5] she has finally "surrendered."

Despite the improving situation, when Yun recalls her most difficult times, the pain and anxiety still linger vividly: "I was suffering from severe insomnia. For two months, I slept only two or three hours every night. I was looking for my daughter. I was worried about my husband. I had to take sleeping pills…I wanted to jump into the river so that I could be rid of everything, but I did not, I could not…" That was Yun's darkest time, struggling with her husband's black lung disease as well as the numerous issues that ensued—being excluded from the assistance plan, shouldering multiple responsibilities, and dealing with family estrangement for years, before finally getting some relief. That was also the time, as will be shown below, when Yun began to grow into an astute caregiver and, later, a radical activist.

---

[5] Harriet Evans has astute observations on how daughters always want to be "a different mother" in Chinese families. While Evans focuses on urban regions, the dynamics of daughter-mother relationships also speak to Yun and her daughter's experience. See Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, c2008).

“Now I know the Rules”

While no medical cure exists that can help patients completely recover from black lung, several treatment methods have been recognized and are commonly used among patients, including lung transplant, lung lavage, and more conservative treatments. Lung transplant appears to target the root of the medical problem by replacing a dust-contaminated lung with a clean one. But patients’ bodies may have a strong rejection reaction to the new organ. Some patients are skeptical of the surgery. For example, Mei told me that they would never consider a lung transplant, since they had heard about a patient who died the second day after his operation. Regardless, most patients cannot afford a lung transplant. Not only is the surgery itself very costly, the follow-up treatment and medication necessary to sustain the patient’s life can easily drag patients into heavy debt.[6] Another treatment that is more frequently used and also more affordable is lung lavage. Many of my interlocutors have done this once or twice, at a cost of over 10,000 yuan each time. In most cases, however, the effect does not satisfy patients’ expectations. Patient feedback similar to the following is not uncommon

---

[6] For a prominent example, Zhang Haichao, who became well-known after his “open the chest and check the lung” (*kaixiong yanfei* 开胸验肺) event in 2009 and eventually received compensation of 1,200,000 yuan from the local government, received lung transplant surgery in 2013. Zhang has to take anti-rejection medications for the rest of his life, which costs him 6,000-7,000 yuan per month. Stopping the medicine means risking his life. While the compensation he received was quite high (in comparison to other compensated patients), it could hardly cover his medical expenses. See Haichao Zhang 张海超 and Ke Liang 梁珂, “Weile zhengming ziji you chenfeibing, wo xuanze le kaixiong yanfei” 为了证明自己有尘肺病, 我选择了‘开胸验肺’ [To Prove I Have Black Lung, I Chose to ‘Open My Chest’], last modified April 13, 2020. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/fOZyNiXRdBXeeRoc4rsUtQ.

among those who have received lung lavage: "I thought I would recover soon, but lung lavage just made my lungs more fragile! I imagined the procedure would remove the dust, but… the dust has been deeply adhering to my lung tissue. I should not have done this procedure…" This is not meant to doubt the usefulness of lung lavage, but to point out the importance of receiving follow-up treatment and good care after the procedure. Many patients believe in the magical effects of lung lavage, and thus borrow money from friends and relatives for a one-time treatment, in the hopes of recovering quickly, regaining their labor capacity, and then repaying their debts. However, such beliefs in "techno-solutionism" often turn out to be impotent and even to backfire in the case of black lung.[7] Patients can end up piling up debts and experiencing worsening health conditions, because they cannot fill the bottomless pit of follow-up treatment fees. Lung lavage is, as one patient said, "what only rich people can do."

Unlike those patients who mainly get their treatment from professional healthcare services, Yun and her husband seldom go to the hospital. Their most recent hospital visit was four or five years ago. Living in a remote village of their province, traveling to well-acknowledged hospitals in the capital city can be quite taxing for them. At the time of their last visit, they had only 2,000 yuan left to their names, and this was

---

[7] For "techno-solutionism" and medical treatment, see, for example, John Gardner and Narelle Warren, "Learning from Deep Brain Stimulation: The Fallacy of Techno-Solutionism and the Need for 'Regimes of Care'," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 22, no. 3 (2019): 363–374. For a general discussion on "techno-solutionism," see Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

reserved for daily expenses. Yun's brother helped collect money from each member of their large family and eventually scraped together their traveling expenses.[8] Their medical visit, however, did not turn out to be very helpful. Yun and her husband visited two hospitals, one the most prestigious in the region and the other one specializing in occupational diseases. In the first hospital, they were told that there was no effective treatment that could cure black lung and they should rely on daily care at home. In the second hospital, where many black lung patients in that province received treatment, they were recommended to do lung lavage. It would cost 17,000 yuan, plus several weeks of hospitalization. Yun was at once skeptical: "We know the disease is incurable, so how would lung lavage do any good? I have heard from another doctor that lung lavage cuts patients' life spans! We cannot afford it anyway. The financial conditions in my family would not allow it at all." A rare medical visit for Yun and her husband ended, ironically, by confirming their mistrust in the existing therapies.

However, this became a turning point in Yun's experience as a caregiver. She started to realize that professional treatment was neither affordable nor reliable, and she decided to find a new approach. Rather than focus on one-time, intense treatment methods, Yun began to place more emphasis on daily life details and small treatments available near their home. They have tried medications in the local clinics, even though

---

[8] Yun has a big family, with three sisters and three brothers. She is the youngest. Most of her family live close to Yun's family in the county and have supported them.

some are outdated or unauthorized. Yun also improvises based on what is available and affordable and mainly targets the symptoms, as care is practiced around the world where medical resources are scarce.[9] Since some symptoms of black lung are similar to those of a cold, Yun usually treats her husband's disease as if treating a cold. Yun understands that her husband's symptoms are caused by the dust in his lungs, different from the cause of a cold. However, as a caregiver, she pays most attention to how her care receiver feels every day and whether his symptoms could be remedied by the treatments available to her. While Yun's care practices seem superficial and, compared to treatments like lung transplant and lung lavage, might be regarded as "treating only the symptoms but not the root causes" (*zhibiao bu zhiben* 治标不治本) in traditional Chinese medicine, they work surprisingly well on her husband's body and can usually stop the symptoms from worsening. I sometimes saw her husband in our video chats. Unlike many other patients, he looked energetic, often with a big smile on his face.

Yun's success is built on years of practice. She observes and tracks her husband's reactions to her care methods, and then makes adjustments, searching for the treatment procedures that work best for her husband's sick body in particular. This involves an extraordinary learning process. She has to distinguish which medicines are useful, track the duration and manner that the disease strikes, and even perform trials and tests on

---

[9] Julie Livingston, *Improvising Medicine: An African Oncology Ward in an Emerging Cancer Epidemic* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2012).

her husband's body. Over time, Yun has managed to customize an effective treatment plan specifically for her husband. She is proud of her care work: "Now I know the rules, and I know what to do when he gets sick. See, he is in very good condition. I believe my husband can live for another 20 years." Here is her description of her care procedures:

> "I got him some nutritious, tonic food. I got white chicken. Those who are familiar with Chinese medicine know that white chicken stewed with black-bone chicken can make really good food. Very nourishing (*bu* 补).[10] The chicken costs 35 yuan a *catty* [about 600 grams]. I bought four chickens for him. Then I cooked pigs' trotters with figs. I heard from others that this kind of food could have a good effect, anyway. I cooked whatever would be good for his health. I also used honey harvested in February and March to stew meat for him... When he catches a cold, we do not go to the hospital. Medicines there are not very good, and not covered by insurance, either[11]... We go to the [local] private clinic for the infusion of liquid for a few days. Then we go home, and I cook those tonic foods for him again. This has been the routine for the past two years."

I was impressed by how confidently and clearly Yun described her caregiving process, and struck by her discontent with approved medicines in the hospitals. While receiving infusions of liquid is indeed very common in rural China, it is debatable whether these are truly effective or just placebos. The treatments from their local clinics are also dubious, as many of these clinics—as well as the medical workers there—are not authorized providers. For people with more choices, a local clinic is not likely the first place they would resort to. Mei's husband, for example, would prefer to go to a big

---

[10] *Bu*: A Chinese term, meaning that the food can supplement and energize a weak body.

[11] Like many families in rural China, Yun's family has joined "The New Rural Cooperative Medical Insurance" (*xinnonghe* 新农合). The rate for 2021 is 280 yuan per rural resident. At the time of our chats, Yun was collecting money to pay for next year's insurance. Medical expenses relevant to occupational health are not included. Patients would have to apply for "Work-Related Injury Insurance." This again subjects black lung patients to the difficult task of identifying accountable employers and proving their previous employment relationship.

hospital, follow professionals' suggestions, and take the medicines provided there. Yun, by comparison, has a distinct set of strategies, based on the limited resources available to her family and on the rich experience she has accumulated over the past several years.

Yun's expertise as a caregiver illuminates the rethinking of comparisons between professional caregiving in a hospital and (in most cases) nonprofessional caregiving in the household. Scholars have been concerned with the objectification of patients undergoing professional treatment for decades.[12] Health professionals tend to treat patients as bodies to be repaired rather than social beings with whom they might build a relationship, so that patients can easily be subjected to medical machines, standardized procedures, and mechanical checks in a clinic setting. Patients' particular experiences of illness tend to be universalized in those contexts where each step must be clear-cut and objective. Medical anthropology has recognized that medical issues are invariably at once socially, politically, and culturally specific, meaning that where and why patients become sick and how patients are afflicted by diseases in their everyday lives matter.

---

[12] See, for example, Byron J Good, *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada, and Jakob Steensig, "Knowledge, Morality and Affiliation in Social Interaction," in *The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation*, ed. Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada, and Jakob Steensig (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 3–25.

While this is now foundational in anthropology, the clinical setting seems to eliminate these nuances and, hence, the complex meanings and narratives behind each ill person.[13]

The current scholarship on family care, by contrast, celebrates an opposite scenario that takes place in the household. Embodied communication, which is key to the familial context, is conceptualized as practices of relationality, empathy, and affect, thus differing from the reductive caregiving in a hospital setting.[14] We, certainly, can identify caregivers' embodiment as an essential part of family care practices. For example, Mei's anger and impatience is one consequence of her long-term embodiment of all kinds of sicknesses in her home. Yun's life is also no exception. Often in our chats, Yun mentioned how hearing her husband's severe cough and breathlessness has become a repetitive torture, causing unease inside her body as well. However, empathy and family love alone cannot save Yun's husband from the suffering caused by black lung. Suitable methods and daily learning also need to be in place. Further, Yun's learning process is different from that in a professional setting. What matters for Yun is not scientific analysis of the disease, its symptoms, and medicines, but observations of her husband's daily condition. Yun's methodology is blended with deep embodiment and bent by the scarcity of accessible resources. Her medical knowledge may be quite

---

[13] Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Conditions* (1988; repr., New York: Basic Books, 2020).
[14] Marjorie Harness Goodwin and Asta Cekaite, *Embodied Family Choreography: Practices of Control, Care, and Mundane Creativity* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

limited; as she often admits herself, "I am just a rural woman (*nongcun nvren* 农村女人) who is barely literate (*dazi bushi* 大字不识)." Yet, Yun has managed to do what most health professionals cannot do in treating black lung. She is an acute observer and recorder. She knows when the treatment works, even if she does not understand why.

Yun's expertise as a family caregiver for a black lung patient shows how systematic methodology can be developed from experiences of daily illness in the household, along with embodied communication and human touch. Given how Yun's personalized care methods have turned out to be surprisingly effective, we not only need to rethink the relationship between professional versus nonprofessional care but also the question raised by prominent medical anthropologists like Annemarie Mol.[15] That is, does the abundance of treatment choices available necessarily point to good care, as today's health economy would have us believe? The choices of new technologies for medical problems, certainly, are also part of this doubt. For an incurable disease like black lung, the answer is uncertain. Some patients who have received lung transplants manage to maintain good health. Yet, there are examples like Yun's unconventional caregiving practices whose results are no less satisfactory. We may also note other black lung patients' creative, compromised reactions to the scarcity of their situations, such as

---

[15] Annemarie Mol, *The Logic of Care: Health and the Problem of Patient Choice* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

self-made ventilators and inexpensive, alternatives ethnomedicines.[16] While acknowledging black lung patients' daily struggles and suffering, we can also appreciate these inspired creations that illustrate new thinking on care.

"You Would Be a Revolutionary"

The existing literature notes that caregivers may embody not only their care receivers' pain and illness but also the cause of the disease, and, hence, all kinds of social inequality.[17] This is also manifested in Yun's experience. Alongside her daily care practices, Yun has gained a thorough understanding of the causes of black lung disease, including the poor working conditions, chaotic labor management, and the exploitative economic system. Yun has also spent much of her time learning about labor laws and protests in other places. As aforementioned, her family's application to the local assistance plan was rejected, while some villagers' requests were accepted. Yun has insisted, however, that her family should be included, per the wording of the policy. Thus, she has participated in several petitions to the local government, along with other patients' families who were also excluded. Unfortunately, these have not been fruitful.

---

[16] In a chat group established by black lung patients that I have been observing, for example, one patient suggests others drinking houttuynia boiled in water half an hour before taking the western medicine. Notoginseng is also a type of Chinese medicine frequently mentioned.

[17] Elana D. Buch, "Senses of Care: Embodying Inequality and Sustaining Personhood in the Home Care of Older Adults in Chicago," *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 4 (2013): 637–650; Felicity Aulino, *Rituals of Care: Karmic Politics in an Aging Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

In 2019, Yun went to the capital city of her province with some patients from her county for another try. This small group of 27, inspired by successful attempts elsewhere, hoped to draw attention from the public and the higher governments, in turn pressuring the local government to respond. Like rural residents around the country, Yun and her peers have "disaggregated trust" in government officials at different levels.[18] Because their local government was involved in the auction of the mines and is believed to have unequally distributed assistance, they have completely lost trust in their rural officials' performance. Yet, Yun reserved the hope that the problems could be resolved if they were noticed by officials at higher levels.

Notably, in the case of black lung, women's participation in protests is not common. From Zhang Haichao's sensational "open the chest and check the lung" (*kaixiong yanfei* 开胸验肺) case, which has fortunately brought him a significant amount of compensation, to several successful protests in recent years that have pressured local governments to release assistance policies,[19] men have been the main players in these actions. Wing-Chung Ho documents the collective actions initiated by women who were

[18] Tony Saich, "Citizens' Perceptions of Governance in Rural and Urban China," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 12 (2007): 1–28.

[19] See Chun Dai 戴春, "Zhongguo chenfeibing qunti jiuzhu moshi fenxi" 中国尘肺病群体救助模式分析 [Analysis of the Assistance Model of Pneumoconiosis Patients in China], *Zhongguo renli ziyuan kaifa* 中国人力资源开发 [Human Resources Development in China], 01 (2016): 90–96.

cadmium-poisoned after years of work in battery factories in Guangdong Province.[20] However, Yun—the first woman among my interlocutors who has been actively involved in all forms of political resistance—is different from both of these groups of protestors. She is not a patient herself. Nonetheless, her life has been indirectly yet dramatically affected by black lung disease. Among the male protesters who are patients themselves, she acts as a representative for her husband. This is even more remarkable if we consider Yun's life before the disease invaded her family. When her husband still worked at the mine sites, Yun was a housewife whose daily life was occupied with housework, child care, and farming in the field. This previously gendered division of labor in Yun's family accords with general observations on family structures in rural China in the current scholarship. Studies often summarize such labor divisions as "men manage the outside, women manage the inside" (*nanzhuwai, nüzhunei* 男主外, 女主内), meaning that men are responsible for work that demands connections to the "outside," while women take up work "inside" the household.[21] The traditional gender roles are clearly challenged in families afflicted with black lung, as men lose their labor capacity and thus can hardly maintain their connections with the "outside" sphere through work.

---

[20] See chapter 3, "Cadmium-Poisoned Women: Contesting for Sick Role Status," in Wing-Chung Ho, *Occupational Health and Social Estrangement in China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).
[21] Erin Elizabeth Thomason, "Obliged to Care: Rural Chinese Families, Migration, and the Changing Intergenerational Contract," (PhD diss., University of California: Los Angeles, 2017). Also see Susan Mann, "Work and Household in Chinese Culture: Historical Perspectives," in *Re-drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China*, ed. Barbara Entwine and Gail E. Henderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

I would argue, however, that the transformation of gender roles takes place in a more nuanced way. It is true that women, especially wives of black lung patients who were housewives, often start taking jobs outside their families.[22] Yet, other activities, especially those that involve negotiation with other social units, remain men's responsibilities. The division of work in the outside space in Mei's family is a typical example. Mei has a job that sustains the family, but when it comes to protests or talks with doctors, her husband takes the lead. Yun's experience, therefore, is exceptional.

What happened during and after the 2019 protest further depicts Yun's role as a radical activist. The way that Yun and her fellow protesters demonstrated on the street in their capital city was moderate compared to earlier protests in their county.[23] Their group was small, and, according to Yun, they simply walked on the street and explained their situation to pedestrians who asked. In addition, everyone wore the same T-shirt, reading "Repay the Society" (*huibao shehui* 回报社会), "Volunteer Publicity on Black Lung" (*chenfei yixuan* 尘肺义宣), "Say No to Dust" (*jujue fenchen* 拒绝粉尘), "Take Precautionary Measures" (*zuohao fanghu cuoshi* 做好防护措施), and "Join the Union and Protect Yourself" (*jiaru gonghui baozhang ziwo* 加入工会保障自我) on the back. Yun

---

[22] It should be noted that most jobs that these women take are still reproductive labor. Mei's experience working as a nanny in another family is not uncommon. Other jobs that I have encountered in my interviews include cleaning work in restaurants and hotels, for example.

[23] In 2018, about 200 people (black lung patients and their relatives) gathered in front of the county government building. Most were those excluded by the local assistance plan for vague reasons. That protest did not turn out to be effective. People were urged to go home and wait for further actions.

recalled, "We just wanted to help more people learn about these issues. We were neither blocking the street nor causing any disorder. We did not break the law (*women you meiyou fanfa luo* 我们又没有犯法啰)!" Still, they were quickly noticed and caught by the police, who later called their county government to take them back home. All the demonstrators were then taken to a deportation center, where the conflict escalated. Yun's description of the scenes in her memory is striking and worth fully quoting here:

> "We were taken to the deportation center. They kept everyone in one room and waited for our local government to pick us up.… The police locked us in the yard in front of a house under repair.… A coach and several cars came along.[24] They urged us to go back.… They promised that they would figure things out as long as we went back to our county. [You know…] they wanted to trick us (*xiang ba women pian huilai* 想把我们骗回来) …. They kept saying, 'you come from that place. Even if you seek to talk to our government, we still have to send you back before we can do anything for you. Let us go back to the local government and do whatever we can, negotiate as much as we can.' Many people left after listening to this kind of persuasion. But I did not want to. I could not be scared of what they said (*woshi bukeneng bei tamen xiadao de* 我是不可能被他们吓到的). I had to feed my family. My kids needed to go to school and my husband to be treated. I would rather die than go back (*wo ningyuan si yebu huiqu* 我宁愿死也不回去).… Five police officers tried to force me. I just lied down beneath rows of chairs at the deportation station. They tried to pull me into the car, but I resisted with all my strength. The five young policemen, all about twenty years old, pulled my arms heavily. They lifted me into the car. They were totally exhausted after doing that. I pushed them back, with all my strength. Even my shirts and pants had come off. I knew I did not have the strength to fight back, but I had to perform in that way (*wo zhidao shi niubuguo tamen de, niubuguo wo yangzi yeyao zuogei ni kan* 我知道是拗不过他们的, 拗不过我样子也要做给你看) …I knew that if I went home, nothing good would happen. I would rather die there (*wo ningyuan sizai na* 我宁愿死在那). I could not imagine how the local government would suppress us if I went home.… I knew it when I was at the deportation station."

[24] Government officials, including the mayor of the town and others, drove to Chengdu in their own cars.

Yun's views about her local government turned out to be accurate, unfortunately. After being sent back to her county, she and other protestors were "educated" (*xun* 训) for five full hours. They were sentenced for "provocative and disturbing acts" (*xunxin zishi xingwei* 寻衅滋事行为).[25] In addition, each member of the team was asked to reveal their internal organization. The protestors were required to answer questions like, "Who organized everything? Who raised the money? Who initiated the idea?" They were told that if an individual was willing to cooperate, he or she would be released soon as a "reward"; while if that individual refused to speak about the organization, he or she would be imprisoned. Such suppression and threatening tactics, needless to say, are common strategies practiced by local officials around the country.[26] Further, since charges like "provocative and disturbing acts" and "disturbing the social order" are

---

[25] In the recent 2020 amended version, Article 293 in China's Criminal Law writes: "Whoever disrupts the social order by committing any of the following provocative and disturbing acts shall be sentenced to imprisonment of not more than 5 years, limited incarceration or probation." This charge is commonly called "provocative and disturbing acts" (*xunxin zishi xingwei* 寻衅滋事行为) or "disturbing the social order" (*raoluan shehui zhian* 扰乱社会治安). This can be traced back to the notorious "hooliganism" (*liumang* 流氓) charge in China's 1979 Criminal Law, which arbitrarily sentenced many innocent people to prison or death because of its vague, manipulable definition. In 1997, when the state amended it into the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, the "hooliganism" charge was divided into several specific items. The item "provocative and disturbing acts" remains, however, and still lacks a clear definition. Today, the charge is widely applied to social activists and protestors. Because the definition is vague, local governments hold the power to interpret it however they wish. Note that Li Wenliang was charged with something similar, although he did not end up being sentenced to a certain punishment. The letter of admonition issued by the Wuhan Police Bureau, in Li's case, writes that "your behaviors have severely disturbed the social order." (This rhetoric is based on Public Security Administration Punishments Law, which is beyond the scope of this research). For a recent version of the Criminal Law, see "Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (2020 Amendment Pkulaw Version)," Pkulaw, accessed March 10, 2021, https://www-pkulaw-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/en_law/39c1b78830b970eabdfb.html.

[26] See, for example, Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Protest Leadership in Rural China," *The China Quarterly* 193, no. 2 (2008): 1–23; and Yongshun Cai, "Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China," *The China Quarterly* 193, no. 2 (2008): 24–42.

ambiguous terms and highly contingent on the officials' interpretation, the local government can easily frame rebellious participants as culpable and more docile ones as innocent.[27] As existing studies have observed, officials widely use both threatening actions (e.g., detaining a protest leader) and acts of "bribery" (e.g., releasing some people or buying them off with certain benefits) in suppressing collective actions.[28]

These strategies have proved effective, both in Yun's case and elsewhere. Most of Yun's fellow protesters quickly surrendered when faced with the choice between imprisonment and release, and accordingly, between keeping the secret under tremendous coercion and speaking out. In Yun's words, this outcome "was very disappointing." Remarkably, the group did have very clear organization and agreements that everyone had promised to follow. Members had also discussed their strategy should they be arrested. Before heading to the capital city, each member had contributed about 1,000 yuan. They agreed that if anyone was arrested, the collective fund would be used to hire a lawyer to help them. More crucially, each member agreed that anyone who was arrested would not reveal any information to the police—a strategy commonly seen in collective resistance elsewhere.[29] As Yun believed,

> "Everyone should just say… 'I do not know anything about the other protestors. I was just there doing what I wanted to do. There was no organization. We did not gather. Why is walking on the street a crime? If you are asking why there

---

[27] Cai, "Local Governments," 32.
[28] Li and O'Brien, "Protest Leadership."
[29] Li and O'Brien, "Protest Leadership," 5.

> was such a coincidence that everyone appeared there, how on earth do I know (*na shui zhidao? tian zhidao?* 那谁知道? 天知道?)?'"

The police, however, would not accept such rhetoric. Moreover, the rural officials knew how to make people talk. Yun was one of the few who refused to leak anything. Consequently, she and six other protesters were imprisoned. Yun was taken to a nearby women's prison and jailed for a month. When she told me about her one month of prison life, Yun's face did not show any fear; instead she turned quite sarcastic: "When I got there, the women in the prison were very interested in what had brought me there. I always responded that I did not cause any trouble to anybody (*wo youmei fanshi* 我又没犯事). Then they would say, 'You did nothing wrong? How? Then why did they catch you and put you here? Did they have nothing else to do? (*chibaole chengde* 吃饱了撑的)?'"

It has been a year since Yun's imprisonment. Even in retrospect, she has yet to calm her anger toward her fellow protesters, saying that the "other people were traitors (*pantu* 叛徒). They answered all the questions. They did not think for themselves, and they also hurt us. If no one ever said anything, nobody would have been put into prison..." For Yun, their protest was based on common interests, and each member should have stuck to their agreed upon rules and shared goals.[30] Yun, however, did not realize that their shared goals could be easily dismantled by threats from the police. If

---

[30] For analysis on "interest-based" collective actions (rather than identity-based, for example), see Chris King-chi Chan and Pun Ngai, "The Making of a New Working Class? A Study of Collective Actions of Migrant Workers in South China," *The China Quarterly* 198 (2009): 287–303.

one member reveals their internal organization, the collective commitment breaks down. Most people afflicted with black lung, in my interviews, have shown mistrust in their local governments, mixed with fear and helplessness in the face of rural officials' enormous power. Even those who have a strong will in their fight for deserved compensation hold only cautious optimism about how much they could eventually achieve. Already in poor and worsening health, many do not want to risk "getting into more trouble," especially after several futile attempts or even receiving threats. Under severe suppression, many, including most of Yun's fellow protesters, retreated to the role of "compliant villagers" (*shunmin* 顺民).[31] Such self-discipline, needless to say, is favored by the government. As Li Lianjiang and James O'Brien have noted, "acts of resistance by compliant villagers tend to be occasional, furtive, and comparatively unthreatening."[32] Yun, by comparison, falls into the category of "policy-based resisters" (*diaomin* 刁民), who have a good command of legal knowledge and have learned to follow "a contractual logic" in their resistance.[33] She has learned much about local and national labor policy and insists that, in their case, the county government should step in since it has benefited from the mine property through the auctions. For "compliant

[31] Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China," *Modern China* 39, no. 1 (2013): 28–61.
[32] Li and O'Brien, "Villagers," 35.
[33] Li and O'Brien, "Villagers," 41.

villagers," resistance counts only as "a fleeting moment" in their daily lives.[34] By contrast, for "policy-based resisters," resistance means a long-term struggle, and they will not easily give in.[35] Yun is proud of how she stuck to the group commitment and did not surrender under police pressure. She raised an interesting analogy during our chat:

> "People said to me, 'back in the years when the Japanese invaded the mainland, you would be a revolutionary, absolutely (*ni kending jiushi yige chetouchewei de gemingzhe* 你肯定就是一个彻头彻尾的革命者)!' You know those communists in the anti-Japanese war, right?[36] They would not leak any information to their enemies, even if they were threatened with death. I just think…we are a collective. We have common interests. If I watch/surveil (*jianshi* 监视) you and then you watch her, we are pushing each other toward the guillotine (*duantou tai* 断头台). People cannot do any good, in this way. The government is eager to see 'dog-eat-dog' (*zhengfu babude dajia huxiang yao* 政府巴不得大家互相咬)."

By likening herself to a communist martyr and the rural officials to the enemy, Yun seems to regard herself as standing on the righteous side in these conflicts and, more crucially, to view people who are officially communists in today's Chinese political system as the opposite of what communist party should be, in her opinion. Through Yun's self-identification as such, I started to understand her as not only a creative caregiver but a radical activist. I began to see why Yun would express so much anger about Li Wenliang's experience. She sees herself as an ally of Li and of "real

---

[34] Li and O'Brien, "Villagers," 34.
[35] Li and O'Brien, "Villagers."
[36] The "anti-Japanese war" or "war of resistance against Japan" is translated from *kangri zhanzheng* 抗日战争 in Chinese. It is a term commonly used in the Chinese state's rhetoric in place of the more objective name "Sino-Japanese war." The term is used in textbooks and mass media, and by the general public.

communists." Li, in Yun's view, is someone who was also charged with "disturbing the social order" for his attempts to defend truth and justice. The "real communists" are not those people in her protest group and the local government, but represent some spirits that Yun wants to hold on to. However, as Yongshun Cai notes, in defense of human rights, "participants stage resistance precisely to prompt the government to pay attention to their grievances. It is natural for them to target the government or to disrupt the social order."[37] In practice, Yun's "rightful resistance" has left herself standing in an ambiguous middle space between the legal and the illegal and subjected to vague criminal charges like "provocative and disturbing acts."[38] Last but not least, suppression does not always work. Rather, suppression may backfire and further radicalize resisters.[39] While Yun has decided to take more conservative steps out of concern that the government may also threaten her sickened husband, the radical-activist thoughts have been lingering in her mind. In our last chat, Yun told me about her "future plan": "If my husband is dying and I am left with no choice, I will carry him to the square in front of the county government building. I will be a beggar, and I will only take money given by those officials. I want them to remember, they are the ones who pushed me into this desperate situation…"

---

[37] Cai, "Local Governments", 30.

[38] For "rightful resistance," see Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance," *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 31–55; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[39] Li and O'Brien, "Protest Leadership."

Epilogue: Episodes of Solidarity

Mei continues her nanny work at Feifei's home. She is happily anticipating the arrival of a newborn baby. She is also eagerly awaiting her husband's return from the hospital. She still does not know how to deal with her elder son. But after receiving some "pocket money" (*yasui qian* 压岁钱) during the recent Chinese New Year from her younger son, she is hopeful again. "This guy has his mom in his heart!" (*xinli haishi zhuangzhe ma ya* 心里还是装着妈呀) Mei writes on her social media.

Yun recently left home for some temporary work at a construction site. The site is located in a highland area far away from her family's house, so she has to live on site with a group of male workers. Often, she must abruptly end our chats because of tasks urgently assigned to her. Black lung is a lingering nightmare. But hope is resilient. Once again, she writes, "Hope this world is clear of dust" (*yuan tianxia wuchen* 愿天下无尘).

Over a decade after his sensational "open the chest and check the lung" (*kaixiong yanfei* 开胸验肺) case, Zhang Haichao now works as a bus driver, an activist, and an advisor to his fellow patients. He volunteers in his time off work, assisting others. He also runs several social media channels that publicize knowledge about black lung disease. One of his recent posts is a video-blog in which he demonstrates preventive measures in dust-intensive environments.

Chen Jingyu, a pulmonologist well-known among black lung patients, highlights for the public again that "black lung *is* a disease. There should not be any problems in its

diagnosis."[1] Since his selection as a deputy to the National People's Congress, Chen has introduced more than ten proposals to offer assistance for black lung patients. The difficulties in diagnosing black lung have been raised repeatedly in recent years, Chen laments, but there has not been much improvement.

A national "Action Plan for Pneumoconiosis Prevention and Treatment" (*chenfeibing fangzhi gongjian xingdong fangan* 尘肺病防治攻坚行动方案) was issued in 2019, but it was poorly implemented in many parts of the country. Yan Huiying, a deputy to the National People's Congress who has dedicated the past eight years of her life to black lung patients, says, "We must hold companies that do not obey the labor policy legally accountable." The reason for her dedication is simple: "We should believe in unconditional love in this society. When I look back at my eighties, I hope I can say I did at least one good thing."[2]

Elsewhere in China, Jin has launched a new round of protests.[3] This time Jin and his fellow protesters have, hopefully, made some good progress. Their appeal was reported to the central government in 2019, which, in turn, has finally placed significant

---

[1] My emphasis. Guijie Li, "Renda daibiao Chen Jingyu: Zhendui chenfeibing nongmingong ying jianli biyao de jiuzhu baozhang" 人大代表陈静瑜: 针对尘肺病农民工应建立必要的救助保障 [NPC Deputy Chen Jingyu: Assistance Has to be Built for Black Lung Migrant Workers], last modified March 2, 2021, http://news.cyol.com/app/2021-03/02/content_18960365.htm.

[2] Tingting Xu 徐婷婷 and Aibing Wang 王艾冰, "Tandao chenfeibing, Daibiao weiyuan luolei le," 谈到尘肺病，代表委员落泪了 [Speaking of Black Lung: The Deputy Cried], last modified March 5, 2021, http://med.china.com.cn/content/pid/241138/tid/1023.

[3] For confidentiality concerns, Jin is a pseudonym. Chen Jingyu, Yan Huiying, Zhang Haichao, and Zhang Yuanjun (below) are already public figures, so I have used their real names.

pressure on the local government. At the time of our last chat, Jin had received his "work injury/disease certificate" (*gongshang rending* 工伤认定). He is still waiting for an identification form and many other required documents. He tells me, "I can only take one step at a time" (*zhineng yibubu lai* 只能一步步来).

Another patient has passed away. In the chat group, his family thanks those whom they have never met in person: "Thanks for keeping my father company. Now he is gone. Everyone, please take care." For the remainder of the day, the space is reserved for mourning. Taking a moment to remember a life is a minor yet vital act of resistance against the system that has reduced these workers to disposable bodies.

Zhang Yuanjun, the black lung patient who devoted the last four years of his life to helping other patients, left us in July 2019. Earlier in the year he was sent to an intensive care unit. With ventilator tubes in his body, he could not speak. He wrote down his wishes: "If I die, donate my organs. If I survive, I will continue [my voluntary work] with my brothers (*huozhe xiongdi yiqi* 活着兄弟一起)."

And many, many others.

These efforts made by patients, caregivers, activists, and doctors around the country, much like the stories of Mei and Yun detailed in this work, echo what Joel

Robbins terms "an anthropology of the good."[4] Faced with a situation in which the state and corporations evade their responsibilities and medical resources are barely accessible, people who are suffering respond with incredible resilience, agency, creativity, and, most crucially, solidarity. Black lung patients who, thanks to assistance from NGOs like Love Save Pneumoconiosis (*da'ai qingchen* 大爱清尘) and individual donors, have managed to satisfy their basic needs are now dedicating themselves to helping their peers, as a way of giving back to society. Online chat groups have been established, connecting patients from around the country to share information, guide each other through the compensation process, send encouragement, and grieve their fellow patients' deaths. The members may not know each other in person and often live hundreds of miles apart. But their shared medical identity as black lung patients—or workers who have been sickened by exploitative, dangerous jobs—can instantly turn strangers into close friends. While each patient's experience is peculiar and contingent on their specific circumstances, the group shares pieces of a collective traumatic memory: being exposed to concentrated dust with no protection, working in extremely poor conditions, experiencing dust slowly eating their lungs, and worrying about their family's futures. Shared experiences among black lung patients allow them to form a common identity, which in turn connects and incorporates more people into the group.

---

[4] Joel Robbins, "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Towards an Anthropology of the Good," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): 447–462.

The narratives in this thesis belong to such a chain of solidarity, with a focus on the relatively marginal(ized) women caregivers for black lung patients. These women's daily lives of caregiving have illustrated the complex impact caused by the incurable black lung as well as the creative responses initiated by suffering people in desperate situations. Understanding these women's daily struggle not only constitutes an indispensable episode of "an anthropology of the good" in the case of black lung, but also bears out how "the dark" deriving from the state apparatus and neoliberal economy is intricately deepened, expanded, and transformed as time goes by.[5] The interaction between the good and the dark extends from a mining site to the household, and then to subsequent generations and even far into the future.

Nevertheless, by foregrounding the women behind black lung patients and documenting other forms of caregiving and activism, this work has no intention to overshadow men's suffering and efforts, or to assume antagonism between different genders. In western feminist debates, men are invariably thought of as beneficiaries in a patriarchal capitalist economy and sources of dominance over women. I do find western literature that reveals the systemic exploitation of women helpful to this work, as my analysis of Mei's and Yun's stories has shown. Yet, I also find it limiting and violent to solely rely on western feminist thought. By "violent," I mean it risks subjecting people's

---

[5] Sherry Ortner, "Dark Anthropology and its Others: Theory since the Eighties," *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 1 (2016): 47–73.

lived experiences to universal values and imposing extra pressure on black lung patients, who have already been rendered disposable by the transforming Chinese social structures. Rather than a feminism against men, my act of "foregrounding women" pursues a feminism in solidarity with sickened, marginalized, sacrificed men against the state apparatus and neoliberal capitalism.

How should we think about feminism, when women are exploited by their men whose bodies are seriously wounded and who once made huge sacrifices to support their families? How do we talk about reproductive labor as gender coercion versus love and care? This work may not provide exhaustive answers; instead, it serves to reveal the complexity of these questions. When feminist debates intersect with suffering and care, the existing paradigm demands much more variation. This work is not a radical manifesto against gender disparity. It is, rather, a testimony of solidarity. Activism is not the privilege of men, while care work is much more than serving the sick at their bedsides.

So, where are the anthropologists? Do we also count as an episode in this narrative of solidarity? Surely, we want to do *care*-ful research, "listening and responding" and "learning to be affected" in conversations with our interlocutors.[6] With

---

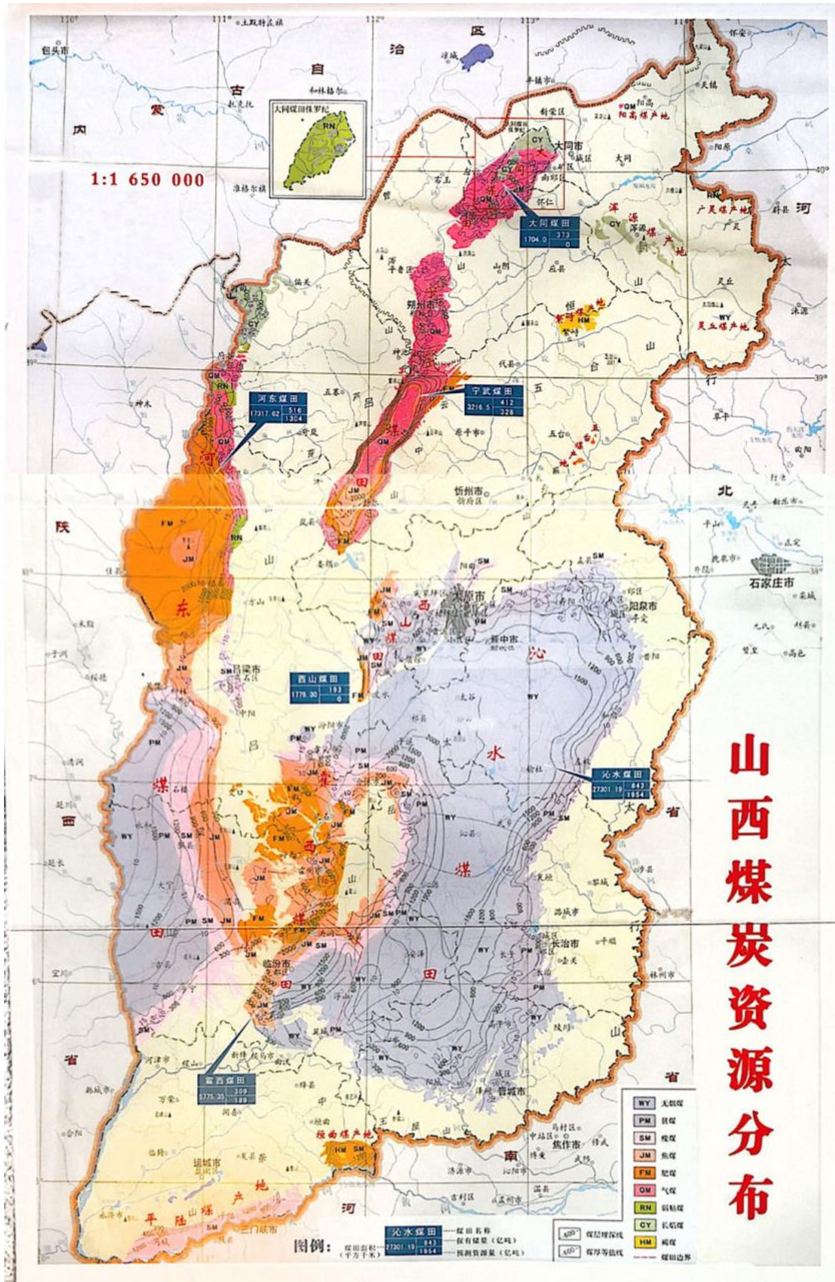
[6] Melissa Atkinson-Graham, Martha Kenney, Kelly Ladd, Cameron Michael Murray, and Emily Astra-Jean Simmonds, "Care in Context: Becoming an STS Researcher," *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 5 (2015): 741; also quoted in Catelijne Coopmans and Karen M. McNamara, "Care in Translation: Care-ful Research in Medical Settings," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 14, no. 1 (2020): 4.

black lung patients and their family members, we are also obliged to "acknowledge pain," or to feel and embody the pain.[7] Yet, I have asked myself many times during this work whether we have done enough "listening," and what else we can do except in terms of ideological efforts. If we think about "the needs of the people," as Ricardo Falla would insist, we should consider not only talking and writing about these "needs" but also engaging them and pushing to satisfy them.[8] Anthropology connotes laborious work. It is *praxis* in itself. Or, as Iain Wilkinson and Arthur Kleinman recently reminded us, "there has to be more than an expression of intellectual interest and emotional concern," and this "involves a strong commitment to the development of social science as a field of social care and caring practice."[9] I take this work as a starting point of my commitment.

---

[7] Carol Delaney, "Participant-observation: The Razor's Edge," *Dialectical Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1988): 293.
[8] Beatriz Manz, "Reflections on an Antropología Comprometida: Conversations with Ricardo Falla," in *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, ed. Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 267.
[9] Iain Wilkinson and Arthur Kleinman, *A Passion for Society: How We Think about Human Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 19.

Appendix A: Distribution of Coal Resources in Shanxi[1]



[1] "Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle" Compilation Committee "山西煤炭工业志" 编纂委员会编, Shanxi meitan gongye zhi 1978﹣2010 山西煤炭工业志 1978﹣2010 [Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle 1978﹣2010] (Beijing: China Coal Industry Publishing House, 2015).

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Aulino, Felicity. *Rituals of Care: Karmic Politics in an Aging Thailand*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.

Atkinson-Graham, Melissa, Martha Kenney, Kelly Ladd, Cameron Michael Murray, and Emily Astra-Jean Simmonds. "Care in Context: Becoming an STS Researcher." *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 5 (2015): 738–48.

"Award winning Chinese documentary filmmaker Zhu Rikun presents his film 'Chen' at Florence's Festival dei Popoli December 4–5." *La Pietra Dialogues, New York University*. Last modified November 28, 2014. http://www.lapietradialogues.org/blog/?p=3712#more-3712.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Black, Steven P. "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Care." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (2018): 79–95.

Briggs, Jean. "Kapluna Daughter." In *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences*, edited by Peggy Golde, 19–44. 1970. Reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Butler, Judith. *The Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*. 2009. Reprint, London; New York: Verso Books, 2016.

Buch, Elana D. "Senses of care: Embodying inequality and sustaining personhood in the home care of older adults in Chicago." *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 4 (2013), 637–650.

Byler, Darren. "Uyghur Dispossession, Culture Work and Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Global City." PhD diss., University of Washington, 2018.

Cai, Yongshun. "Local Governments and the Suppression of Popular Resistance in China." *The China Quarterly* 193, no. 2 (2008): 24–42.

Chan, Chris King-chi and Pun Ngai. "The Making of a New Working Class? A Study of Collective Actions of Migrant Workers in South China." *The China Quarterly* 198 (2009): 287–303.

Chan, Jenny, Mark Selden and Pun Ngai. *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn, and the Lives of China's Workers*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020.

Chen, Kuan-Hsing. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Chen 尘 [Dust]. Directed by Zhu Rikun 朱日坤. 2014. Film.

China Daily. "Red Tape." Accessed March 18, 2021. https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/trans/2012-09/18/content_15765857.htm.

Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention 中国疾病预防控制中心. "Jiankangbao: Shi buwei lianshou zhan chenfei, Xishu yao chu naxie zhao" 健康报: 十部委联手站尘肺, 细数要出哪些招 [Ten Ministries and Commissions Join Forces to Fight Pneumoconiosis]. Last modified July 22, 2019. http://www.chinacdc.cn/mtbd_8067/201907/t20190722_204195.html.

Cooley, Will. "Cruel Optimism." *American Studies* 52, no. 3 (2013): 79–80.

Coopmans, Catelijne and Karen M. McNamara. "Care in Translation: Care-ful Research in Medical Settings." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 14, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

"Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (2020 Amendment Pkulaw Version)." Pkulaw. Accessed March 10, 2021. https://www-pkulaw-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/en_law/39c1b78830b970eabdfb.html.

Dai, Chun 戴春. "Buneng huxi de tong" 不能呼吸的痛 [Pain of Breathlessness]. *Tuanjie* 团结 [Unity] 2 (2013): 30–35.

Dai, Chun 戴春. "Ming ruo chenai: Hunan chenfeibing diaocha jishi houxu" 命若尘埃: 湖南尘肺病调查纪实后续 [Life like Dust: Follow-up of Pneumoconiosis Investigation in Hunan]. *Zhongguo gongren* 中国工人 [Chinese Workers] 7 (2013): 4–14.

Dai, Chun 戴春. "Zhongguo chenfeibing qunti jiuzhu moshi fenxi"中国尘肺病群体救助模式分析 [Analysis of the Assistance Model of Pneumoconiosis Patients in China]. *Zhongguo renli ziyuan kaifa* 中国人力资源开发 [Human Resources Development in China], 01 (2016): 90–96.

Davis, Deborah and Sara L. Friedman. "Deinstitutionalizing Marriage and Sexuality." In *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and*

Urban China, edited by Deborah Davis and Sara L. Friedman, 1–39. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

Davis, Deborah and Stevan Harrell. "Introduction: The Impact of Post-Mao Reforms on Family Life." In *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, edited by Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell, 1–24. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Delaney, Carol. "Participant-observation: The Razor's Edge." *Dialectical Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1988): 291–300.

DISCDuke. "A Conversation about the Uyghur Genocide with Aydin Anwar." YouTube. Last Modified March 19, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2fdvppDWgk.

Dong, Xiao-yuan and Xinli An. "Gender Patterns and Value of Unpaid Care Work: Findings from China's First Large Time Use Survey." *Review of Income and Wealth* 61, no.3 (2015): 540–560.

Duara, Prasenjit. *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

Elliott, Karla. "Caring Masculinities: Theorizing an Emerging Concept." *Men and Masculinities* 19, no.3 (2016): 240–59.

Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no.4 (1982): 777–95.

Fraser, Nancy. "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History." *New Left Review* 56, no. 3 (2019): 97–119.

Fridley, David G. *China Energy Databook*. Berkeley: Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, 2001.

Gardner, John and Narelle Warren. "Learning from Deep Brain Stimulation: The Fallacy of Techno-solutionism and the Need for 'Regimes of Care'." *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (2019): 363–374.

Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Good, Byron J. *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Goodwin, Marjorie Harness and Asta Cekaite. *Embodied Family Choreography: Practices of Control, Care, and Mundane Creativity*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Greenhalgh, Susan. *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Guo, Yuhua 郭于华, Xiaomian Wu 吴小沔 and Mingxun Zhao 赵茗煦. *Chenfeibing nongmingong koushu jilu* 尘肺病农民工口述记录 [*The Oral Accounts of Migrant Workers with Black Lung]*. Beijing: Intellectual Property Publishing House, 2020.

Gupta, Akhil. "Reliving Childhood? The Temporality of Childhood and Narratives of Reincarnation." *Ethnos* 67, no.1 (2002): 33–55.

Federici, Silvia. *Wages Against Housework*. Bristol, UK: falling Wall Press, 1975.

Fussell, Paul. *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983.

Hershatter, Gail. *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Ho, Wing-Chung. "Biopolitics, Occupational Health and State Power: The Marginalization of Sick Workers in China." *The China Quarterly* 219 (2014): 808–826.

Ho, Wing-Chung. *Occupational Health and Social Estrangement in China*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Viking Adult, 1989.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. "Love and Gold." In *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, 15–30. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Hollan, Douglas. "The Relevance of Person-Centered Ethnography to Cross-Cultural Psychiatry." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 34, no. 2 (1997): 219–34.

Hongdagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. "Blowups and Other Unhappy Endings" In *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, edited by Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, 55-69. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003.

Huang, Yuqin. *Transforming the Gendered Organisation of Labour and Leisure: Women, Labour, Leisure and Family in Lianhe Village, Central China, 1926-2013*. Singapore: Springer; [China]: ECUST Press, 2020.

Hunter, Sarah C., Damien W. Riggs and Martha Augoustinos. "Hegemonic Masculinity Versus a Caring Masculinity: Implications for Understanding Primary Caregiving Fathers." *Social & Personality Psychology Compass* 11, no.3 (2017): 1–9.

Jacka, Tamara, Andrew B. Kipnis and Saly Sargeson. *Contemporary China: Society and Social Change*. Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

"'Jingji banxiaoshi' jizhe qinli Shanxi Fanshi kuangnan diaocha" '经济半小时'记者亲历山西繁峙矿难调查 [Economic Half Hour' Reporter Went to Shanxi Fanzhi Mine Disaster Investigation]. *CCTV*, July 5, 2002. http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2002-07-05/2222626987.html.

Kleinman, Arthur. *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Conditions*. 1988. Reprint, New York: Basic Books, 2020.

Kleinman, Arthur. *The Soul of Care: The Moral Education of a Husband and a Doctor*. New York: Viking, 2019.

Kuai, Feiyi. "Breathing In and Shouting Back: Black Lung Disease and Neo-liberalism in China." Undergraduate Thesis, Duke University, 2017.

Kuangming, mafu, chenfeibing 矿民, 马夫, 尘肺病 [Miners, the Horsekeeper and Pneumoconiosis]. Directed by Jiang Nengjie 蒋能杰. 2019. Film.

Leng, Rong 冷溶, Zuoling Wang 汪作玲, Jianqi Yan 阎建琪, and Huayuan Xiong 熊华源, ed. *Deng Xiaoping nianpu 1975–1997* 邓小平年谱 1975–1997 [*A Chronicle of Deng Xiaoping 1975–1997*]. Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2004.

Li, Guijie, "Renda daibiao Chen Jingyu: zhendui chenfeibing nongmingong ying jianli biyao de jiuzhu baozhang" 人大代表陈静瑜: 针对尘肺病农民工应建立必要的救助保障 [NPC Deputy Chen Jingyu: Assistance Has to be Built for Black Lung Migrant Workers]. Last modified March 2, 2021, http://news.cyol.com/app/2021-03/02/content_18960365.htm.

Li, Lianjiang. "The Magnitude and Resilience of Trust in the Center: Evidence from Interviews with Petitioners in Beijing and a Local Survey in Rural China." *Modern China* 39, no.1 (2013): 3–36.

Li, Lianjiang and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Protest Leadership in Rural China." *The China Quarterly* 193, no. 2 (2008): 1–23.

Li, Lianjiang and Kevin J. O'Brien. "Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China." *Modern China* 22, no. 1 (1996): 28–61.

Lin, Kevin. "Work Unit." In *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, 331–334. Canberra, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2019.

Litzinger, Ralph. "The Afterlives of the Long 1980s: Thoughts toward an Ethnography of Dust." Paper presented at the 能 Capacity/ Energy Conference, Columbia University, October 2019.

Litzinger, Ralph and Yanping Ni. "Zhang Haichao's 'Open-Chest Case'." In *Landscapes of Chinese Labour: A History of China's Working Class*, edited by Ivan Franceschini, Kevin Lin, Nicholas Loubere, and Christian Sorace [under review].

Liu, Weifang. "The Whole Story of the Establishment of the 'Dual Policy of Diligence and Frugality' on Chinese Women's Work." In *Women, Family and the Chinese Socialist State, 1950-2010*, edited by Xiaofei Kang, 223–241. Leidon, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020.

Livingston, Julie. *Improvising Medicine: An African Oncology Ward in an Emerging Cancer Epidemic*. Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2012.

Luan, Chunhui 栾春晖. "Sibu mingmu de kongsu: Shanxi sheng fanzhi xian '6.22' kuangnan zhuizong" 死不瞑目的控诉: 山西省繁峙县'6.22' 矿难追踪 [Deadly Accusation: Shanxi Fanzhi 6.22 Mine Disaster Tracking]. Last modified July 2, 2002. http://news.southcn.com/china/zgkx/200207020669.htm.

Malinowski, Bronisław. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1922.

Mann, Susan. "Work and Household in Chinese Culture: Historical Perspectives." In *Re-drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China*, edited by Barbara Entwine and Gail E. Henderson, 15–32. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Manz, Beatriz. "Reflections on an Antropología Comprometida: Conversations with Ricardo Falla." In *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and*

Survival*, edited by Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 261–274. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Marx, Karl. "Progressive Production o f a Relative Surplus-Population or Industrial Reserve Army." In *The Marx-Engel Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 422–429New York: Norton, 1972.

Mason, Katherine. *Infectious Change: Reinventing Chinese Public Health After Pandemic*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.

Mei qian 煤钱 [Coal Money]. Directed by Wang Bing 王兵. 2009. Film.

Mies, Maria. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. 1986. Reprint, London: Zed Books, 2014.

Mies, Maria and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalized Economy*. London: Zed Books, 1999.

Mies, Maria, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof. *Women: The Last Colony*. London; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1988.

Mignolo, Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 159–81.

Miyazaki, Hirokazu. "The Economy of Hope: An Introduction." In *The Economy of Hope*, edited by Hirokazu Miyazaki and Richard Swedberg, 1–36. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

Mol, Annemarie. *The Logic of Care: Health and the Problem of Patient Choice*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Molero-Simarro, Ricardo. "Inequality in China Revisited: The Effect of Functional Distribution of Income on Urban Top Incomes, The Urban-rural Gap and the Gini Index, 1978–2015." *China Economic Review* 42 (2017): 101–117.

Morozov, Evgeny. *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. New York: Public Affairs, 2013.

Nowotny, Helga. "Austria: Women in Public Life." In *Access to Power: Cross-national Studies of Women and Elites*, edited by Cynthia Fuchs Epstein and Rose Laub Coser, 147–156. London; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981.

O'Brien, Kevin J. "Rightful Resistance." *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 31–55.

O'Brien, Kevin J. and Lianjiang Li. *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Ortner, Sherry. "Dark Anthropology and its Others: Theory since the Eighties." *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 no. 1 (2016): 47–73.

"*Rang qiye qingzhuang zouxiang shichang*" 让企业轻装走向市场 [Let the Corporations Go to the Market with Lighter Packs]. *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [People's Daily], October 30, 1993. https://cn.govopendata.com/renminribao/1993/10/31/2/#917935.

Robbins, Joel. "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Towards an Anthropology of the Good." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3 (2013): 447–462.

Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter, 157–210. New York, London: Monthly Review Press, 1975.

Rui, Huaichuan. *Globalization, Transition and Development in China: The Case of Coal Industry*. London, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005.

Saich, Tony. "Citizens' Perceptions of Governance in Rural and Urban China." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 12 (2007): 1–28.

Shanhe guren 山河故人 [Mountains May Depart]. Directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯. 2015. Film.

"Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle" Compilation Committee "山西煤炭工业志"编纂委员会编. *Shanxi meitan gongye zhi 1978–2010* 山西煤炭工业志 1978–2010 [Shanxi Coal Mining Industrial Chronicle 1978–2010]. Beijing: China Coal Industry Publishing House, 2015.

Shanxia haoren 三峡好人 [Still Life]. Directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯. 2006. Film.

Shuangxi de yanlei 双喜的眼泪 [Tears in Shuangxi]. Directed by Fan Jiaju 范家驹. 2010. Film.

Smil, Vacla. *China's Past, China's Future: Energy, Food, Environment*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Song, Shaopeng 宋少鹏. "Ziben zhuyi shehui zhuyi he funv: Weishenme zhongguo chongjian makesi zhuyi nvquan zhuyi pipan" 资本主义、社会主义和妇女: 为什么中国需要重建马克思主义女权主义批判 [Capitalism, Socialism, and Women: Why

does China Needs to Rebuild Marxist Feminism]. *Kaifang shidai* 开放时代 [Open Times], 12 (2012): 98–112.

Song, Shaopeng 宋少鹏. "'Shehui zhuyi funv jiefang yu xifang nvquan zhuyi de qubie: Lilun yu shijian' zuofanhui zongshu" 社会主义妇女解放与西方女权主义的区别: 理论与实践' 座谈会综述 [Report on the Seminar "Differences between Socialist Women's Liberation and Western Feminism: Theory and Practice"]. *Shanxi shifan daxue bao* 山西师范大学报 38, no. 4 (2011): 143–149.

Song, Shaopeng 宋少鹏. "'Huijia' haishi 'beihuijia'?: Shichanghua guocheng zhong 'funv huijia' taolun yu zhongguo shehui yishi xingtai zhuanxing" ("回家"还是"被回家"?: 市场化过程中"妇女回家"讨论与中国社会意识形态转型 [Retreating back Home Willingly or Being Unwillingly Sent Home?: Debates on 'Women-going-home' and the Ideological Transformation in the Course of Marketization in China]. *Funv yanjiu luncong* 妇女研究论丛 [Collection of Women's Studies] 106, no. 4 (2011): 5–12, 26.

Song, Jing and Yingchun Ji. "Complexity of Chinese Family Life: Individualism, Familism, and Gender." *China Review* 20, no. 2 (2020): 1–17.

Song, Jing and Weiwan Lai, "Cohabitation and Gender Equality: Ideal and Real Division of Household Labor among Chinese Youth." *China Review* 20, no. 2 (2020): 53–80.

Spakowski, Nicola. "Socialist Feminism in Postsocialist China." *positions: asia critique* 26, no. 4 (2018): 561–592.

Stacey, Clare L. *The Caring Self: The Work Experiences of Home Care Aides*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2011.

Stivers, Tanya, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig. "Knowledge, Morality and Affiliation in Social Interaction." In *The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation*, edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig, 3–25. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Sun, Yelin 孙业礼. "Deng Xiaoping: 'Jiating shige hao dongxi' jianji Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhude deng lingdao ren youguan gongchandang ren ying ruhe duidai jiating de lunshu" 邓小平: "家庭是个好东西"——兼及毛泽东、周恩来、刘少奇、朱德等领导人有关共产党人应如何对待家庭的论述 [Deng Xiaoping: 'Family is a good thing.' Also with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De and Other Leaders' Expositions on How Communists Should Treat Families"]. Last modified January 6, 2014. http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n/2014/0106/c85037-24030270.html.

Tadiar, Neferti X. M. "Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism." *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (2013): 19–48.

Tan, Michael. "Red Tape China." *Charter* 71, no. 2 (2000): 40–41.

Thomason, Erin Elizabeth. "Obliged to Care: Rural Chinese Families, Migration, and the Changing Intergenerational Contract." PhD diss., University of California: Los Angeles, 2017.

Thompson, Charles. "Guestworkers: Farmworkers, Filmmakers, and Their Obligations in the Field." In *Viewpoints: Visual Anthropologists at Work*, edited by Mary Strong, and Laena Wilder, 181–197. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009.

Thomson, Elspeth. *The Chinese Coal Industry: An Economic History*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolf. *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*. 1991. Reprint, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Twigg, Julia. "Carework as a Form of Body Work." *Ageing and Society* 20, no. 4 (2000), 389–411.

Walder, Andrew. *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Wilkinson, Iain and Arthur Kleinman. *A Passion for Society: How We Think about Human Suffering*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.

Wright, Tim. *The Political Economy of the Chinese Coal Industry: Black Gold and Blood-stained Coal*. London: Routledge, 2012.

Xu, Tingting 徐婷婷 and Aibing Wang 王艾冰. "Tandao chenfeibing, Daibiao weiyuan luolei le." 谈到尘肺病，代表委员落泪了[Speaking of Black Lung: The Deputy Cried]. Last modified March 5, 2021. http://med.china.com.cn/content/pid/241138/tid/1023.

Yan, Yunxiang. P*rivate Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949-1999*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Yan, Yunxiang. *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2009.

Yarris, Kristin Elizabeth. "'Pensando Mucho' ('Thinking Too Much'): Embodied Distress Among Grandmothers in Nicaraguan Transnational Families." *Cultural Medical Psychiatry* 38, no. 3 (2014): 473–98.

Zhang, Haichao 张海超. "Chenfeibingren de fei bi shitou hai ying" 尘肺病人的肺比石头还硬 [Black Lung Patients' Lungs Are Harder Than Stones] *Sina Weibo*, August 24, 2020. https://weibo.com/1918072305/JhrGzhy6F?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&ssl_rnd=1616032615.4734&type=comment.

Zhang, Haichao 张海超 and Liang Ke 梁珂. "Weile zhengming ziji you chenfeibing, wo xuanze le kaixiong yanfei" 为了证明自己有尘肺病, 我选择了'开胸验肺' [To Prove I Have Black Lung, I Chose to 'Open My Chest']. Last modified April 13, 2020. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/fOZyNiXRdBXeeRoc4rsUtQ.

Zhang, Na 张娜. "Shizhe Zhang Yuanjun" 逝者张愿军 [Obituary: Zhang Yuanjun]. Last modified October 15, 2020. https://www.163.com/dy/article/FP0EJUGT0530SCGK.html.

"Zhongguo chenfeibing nongmin shengcun zhuangkuang diaocha baogao" 中国尘肺病农民工生存状况调查报告 [Report on the Living Conditions of Migrant Workers with Black Lung]. *China Social Assistance Foundation Love Save Pneumoconiosis* 中华社会救助基金会大爱清尘基金. Last modified 2016. https://www.daqc.org.cn/public/uploads/35/1_20171106191151_j5d8g.pdf.

Zuimei nixing zhe 最美逆行者 [Heroes in Harm's Way]. China Media Group (CMG). 2020. TV Series.