



RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Red Housekeeping” in a Socialist Factory: *Jiashu* and Transforming Reproductive Labor in Urban China (1949–1962)*

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Abstract

While scholarship on “women’s liberation” under historically existing socialism focuses on heroic women making inroads into male-dominated domains, this article explores a previously overlooked group of women in socialist China. Known as *jiashu* in Chinese, these women are the female dependents (wives, mothers, and in-laws) of both male and female employees in a workplace. Specifically, it centers on the experiences of the *jiashu* of textile workers in the city of Zhengzhou from 1949 to 1962. It argues that, despite being portrayed as “parasitizing” off formal workers, *jiashu* performed a wide range of work, both paid and unpaid, inside and outside the household. Similar to their counterparts under capitalism and other state-socialist regimes, these Chinese women’s unpaid domestic work sustained the daily and generational reproduction of the labor force and was thus essential to industrial accumulation. Moreover, *jiashu* also worked on the shopfloor and in collectivized service facilities as paid laborers. Such remunerated work also subsidized accumulation, and the resistance from these women contributed to the eventual collapse of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962). This research advances the field in two ways. First, it expands theories about the relationship between women’s work, social reproduction, and capital accumulation to include work that is both reproductive in nature and remunerated – a previously understudied form of labor. Second, while existing literature focuses on structural analysis and explains why women’s work is functional to accumulation, this study gives equal attention to women’s agency, showing how interactions between the two shaped historical trajectories.

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Introduction

When asked whether she had to balance work and home life while serving as a factory head six decades ago, Hang Huilan, now in her nineties, shared the following: “Many women comrades had a heavy family burden, but I didn’t, because I had ‘Mother Shen’ [Shen ma] who would help out.”¹ Joining the underground Communist Party in Shanghai in 1942 when she was only fifteen, Hang rose quickly as a woman party cadre after the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949. Then, in 1958, she moved to Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan Province, to lead the Zhengzhou Number One Textile Mill.

As one of the only two female factory heads in Zhengzhou’s history, Hang’s name was brought up frequently by local people I interviewed.² Her prominence in the bureaucratic system and her suffering during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) made Hang an unforgettable figure in the local collective memory. Therefore, when I finally had the privilege to speak to Hang herself, I was surprised to hear the story of Mother Shen backstage, as it had never been mentioned by any of my interviewees. Since Mother Shen had passed away many years ago, I could only reconstruct her story through Hang’s account:

Mother Shen, whose maiden name I cannot recall now, married my husband’s brother and had lived in Jiangsu, a province near Shanghai. In the late 1950s, when my husband’s brother died and left behind his wife and two young children, the three of them came to Zhengzhou and sought refuge with my family. In the beginning, Mother Shen was a *jiashu*, living with us, helping me cook, taking care of my two children and my sick parents-in-law, in addition to her own children. That’s why I never cooked. Later, in the 1970s, the neighborhood community started running small factories, and she went to work in one of those to earn a wage. She said, “Everyone has two hands, and I shouldn’t be eating free meals at home”. A few years later, when her daughter found a job as a schoolteacher, Mother Shen and her children moved out. After she left, I didn’t know how to do housework, so I started hiring a paid nanny.

Mother Shen’s identity is a paradox. On the one hand, she was identified by Hang as a *jiashu*, a Chinese term that refers to one’s extended family members, including parents, spouses, children, siblings, and other relatives.³ While in imperial China

¹Interview with Hang Huilan, 7 December 2016.

²This article is based on sources collected for a larger book project, *The Fabric of Care: Women’s Work and the Politics of Livelihood in Industrial China (1920–2020)*, which examines China’s century-long transformation of reproductive labor. The current article combines sources at the national level as well as those derived from an in-depth case study of Zhengzhou. For details about the interview data, see later sections.

³The two characters *jia* and *shu* literally mean “family” and “belonging”. The earliest usage can be traced to the Han period (202 BC to 220 AD), when it referred to a person’s extended family members, especially those who served in the military in frontier lands. See Xuehong Wei and Zonghui Hou, “A Study on the Term ‘Family Members’ in the Han Dynasty Slips from Jianshuijinguan and Related Problems”, *Dunhuang Research*, 4 (2017), pp. 107–114.

the term *jiashu* referred to extended family members of either sex in general, in the early twentieth century, with the rise of industrialization and militarization, it started to be associated with female family members, especially the wives of male workers and military personnel.⁴ During the Mao period (1949–1976), *jiashu* continued to connote such meaning and was increasingly understood as a feminine term. In typical cases, *jiashu* was interchangeable with *zhigong jiashu*, which referred to dependents of employees in a workplace. The term was also used in expressions related to political identities such as *lieshi jiashu* (widows of revolutionary martyrs), *zibenjia jiashu* (dependents of capitalists), and *youpai jiashu* (dependents of Rightists).⁵

On the other hand, adding *ma* (literally “mother” in Chinese) after the surname was the standard way to address a female domestic maid in pre-revolutionary China. Calling her sister-in-law “Mother Shen” reveals how Hang understood the social and economic relationship between the two of them. By doing all the domestic work in exchange for her and her two children’s subsistence, Mother Shen essentially worked as a maid in Hang’s household. Mother Shen, however, seemed to think of herself more as a free-riding family member than a maid. Hence, when there was an opportunity to get a paid job, she did not hesitate to leave, because she believed she had been “eating free meals at home”.

The tension between the label *jiashu* assigned to Shen and all the work she did, from serving Hang’s family to working in the factory, is telling. It reveals that while the term discursively implies one’s dependency on others, the person so labeled was actually anything but simply a “dependent”. Despite constituting the official discourse in Mao-era China and featuring in personal memories about the socialist past, *jiashu* as historical actors have remained obscure, oftentimes escaping scholars’ scrutiny.

Unlike the most popularly circulated female supersymbols from the Mao era, such as the “iron girls” – independent, strong, and muscular women peasants and industrial workers⁶ – the subject of *jiashu* does not fit neatly into the discourse of “socialist women’s liberation”. In the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) rhetoric, these *jiashu* were “‘red’ housekeepers”. On the one hand, the term implies that the Party designated *jiashu* as belonging primarily to the domestic space, asking them to serve other family members who had a paid job. As a result, *jiashu* were oftentimes overshadowed by their husbands and other women working in the public domain, and even deemed “parasites of socialism”.⁷ On the other hand, “‘red’ housekeeping” should be clearly distinguished from “homemaking”, a concept that emerged along

⁴This observation is based on the author’s keyword search in *Shen Bao* (1872–1949), one of the most popular and longest-running newspapers in modern China.

⁵Rightists here refers to targets identified and attacked by the state during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–1959).

⁶For a detailed discussion about the “iron girls”, see Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Berkeley, CA, 2017), pp. 221–241; Yihong Jin, Kimberley Ens Manning, and Lianyun Chu, “Rethinking the ‘Iron Girls’: Gender and Labour during the Chinese Cultural Revolution”, *Gender & History*, 18:3 (2006), pp. 613–634.

⁷One of the first appearances of “parasite” was in Liu Shaoqi’s Speech in *Renmin ribao*, 1 May 1950, even though it was not directly targeted at housewives. The “parasite” criticism was most salient among *jiashu* of the bourgeois class during the transition to socialism before 1956. For example, see Shanghai shi fulian, “Women shi ruhe jiaoyu gongshangye jiashu de”, *Funü gongzuo tongxun*, 1 (1956), p. 9. For the “rearguard” discourse, see Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029–055–003 (1963), p. 14.

with the rise of the breadwinner–homemaker family regime under welfare capitalism.⁸ In the Chinese context, the boundaries of “the domestic” and “the household” themselves underwent radical transformations in the 1950s. At the height of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962, GLF), when most urban housewives were required to work in public spaces and many functions of the household were collectivized, *jiashu* became the primary keepers of those newly created public spaces, starring one of the most radical experiments with regard to social reproduction in history.

This study is first and foremost an empirical sketch of the tumultuous trajectories of *jiashu* crossing different social spaces during the first decade of the PRC. While I draw on a comprehensive collection of primary and second sources to inform my national-level analysis, my account of the local dynamics is based on a case study conducted in the city of Zhengzhou. Sources include documents from the Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, local factory gazetteers, the Database for the History of Chinese Contemporary Political Movements hosted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, as well as interviews with Zhengzhou textile workers and their family members who lived through the socialist period.

Conceptually, this study deepens an ongoing conversation between feminist political economy and studies of historically existing socialism in two ways. First, while existing discussions on women’s work in relation to “socialist primitive accumulation” focus on unpaid work based in the household,⁹ the current case extends to collectivized, remunerated women’s work that used to be done in the household and explains how such work also contributed to socialist accumulation. Second, going beyond uncovering the logic of accumulation, this research also pays close attention to the agency of historical actors. Instead of being passively subjugated to the state’s top-down programs, Chinese women both within the party-state and at the grassroots actively negotiated with the state by encompassing or resisting the category of “*jiashu*”. Some of their endeavors, as I show, became part of the historical process that derailed the GLF, one of the most ambitious projects under Mao.

Women’s Work, Social Reproduction, and Regimes of Accumulation

It has been well established that women’s paid and unpaid work played indispensable roles in underpinning the historical formation of industrial capitalism.¹⁰ In the

⁸This should not be confused with the notion of “municipal housekeeping”, which refers to bourgeois women extending their political activism from the domestic sphere to the public sphere in progressive-era America. Juliann Sivulka, “From Domestic to Municipal Housekeeper: The Influence of the Sanitary Reform Movement on Changing Women’s Roles in America, 1860–1920”, *Journal of American Culture*, 22:4 (1999), pp. 1–7.

⁹Jacob Eyferth, “State Socialism and the Rural Household: How Women’s Handloom Weaving (and Pig-Raising, Firewood-Gathering, Food-Scavenging) Subsidized Chinese Accumulation”, *International Review of Social History*, 67:2 (2022), pp. 231–249; Shaopeng Song, “The State Discourse on Housewives and Housework in the 1950s in China”, in Mechthild Leutner (ed.), *Rethinking China in the 1950s* (Münster [etc.], 2007), pp. 49–63; Shaopeng Song, *Chinese Modernity and Socialist Feminist Theory* (New York, NY [etc.], 2022).

¹⁰For instance, in Britain, before the rise of industrial capitalism, the household economy relied on cooperation among family members in farming, workshops, trades, and other activities. See Louis A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (London, 1978); Deborah Simonton, *A History of*

pre-capitalist economy, women shouldered the lion's share of tasks that sustained the family's daily subsistence and generational renewal.¹¹ At the same time, they actively participated in income-generating activities, such as spinning wool into textiles and weaving textiles into cloth. Their monetary contribution to the household economy, even though relatively small compared to that of men, proved to be crucial for supporting the family during specific stages of its life cycle.¹²

Then, the advent of industrial capitalism brought about a profound transformation in the social structure of women's work, effectively obscuring its value – a process sociologist Maria Mies called “housewifization”.¹³ With the majority of income-generating tasks now being removed from the household and concentrated in factories and other public domains, the household gradually lost its primary role in organizing the economy. Despite initial periods when women (and children) also worked outside the home, over the course of industrialization their labor force participation experienced a decline. Concurrently, their dependence on men increased. This was due not only to an increase in men's real wages, but also because legal institutions and cultural ideologies worked hand in hand to produce a family-wage regime where the man emerged as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker.¹⁴ Meanwhile, women continued to perform all the unpaid work in the household. As these types of labor were not compensated in monetary terms, they were often undervalued and thus deemed dismissible.

Moving beyond the empirical inquiry into the impact of industrial capitalism on women's work, the recently developed Social Reproduction Theory (SRT)¹⁵ – which builds upon the analyses of socialist feminists from the 1970s¹⁶ – conceptualizes women's unpaid domestic work as part of the broader process of social reproduction – processes that sustain the daily and generational renewal of human beings and our societies. While SRT has insightfully exposed how women's work and, more broadly, social reproduction contribute to primitive and continuous accumulation, its analytical scope is primarily limited to the dynamics under capitalism. It is worthwhile asking whether and how women's work configured differently under historically existing socialism, where an alternative way of organizing social reproduction was developed. When communist regimes in the

European Women's Work: 1700 to the Present (New York, 1998); and Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, “The Origins and Expansion of the Male Breadwinner Family: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Britain”, *International Review of Social History*, 42:S5 (1997), pp. 25–64.

¹¹These tasks included cooking, cleaning, childrearing, caring for other family members, as well as self-provisioning activities like gleanings and gathering, growing sideline crops, and raising animals.

¹²Horrell and Humphries, “The Origins and Expansions”, p. 36.

¹³Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor* (London, 2014).

¹⁴Horrell and Humphries, “The Origins and Expansions”, pp. 46–63.

¹⁵Tithi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression* (London, 2017); Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction* (London, 2020); Cinzia Arruzza, “Functionalist, Determinist, Reductionist: Social Reproduction Feminism and Its Critics”, *Science & Society*, 80:1 (2016), pp. 9–30; Alessandra Mezzadri, “The Informal Labours of Social Reproduction”, *Global Labour Journal*, 11:2 (2020), pp. 156–163.

¹⁶Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY, 2004); Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol, 1972).

twentieth century industrialized the economy and transformed social relations, one of their fronts was mobilizing women into paid work and socializing reproductive functions of the family.¹⁷ However, despite a theoretically promising foundation for properly valorizing women's work and promoting gender equality, no communist regimes succeeded in materializing these goals.

A growing body of scholarship on "primitive socialist accumulation" could provide some insights into understanding these predicaments: despite their claimed radical departure from capitalism, historical communist regimes shared the same feature of their antithesis, that is, to achieve rapid industrial accumulation at the cost of social reproduction despite the rhetoric of social protections and welfare.¹⁸ Under some circumstances, they even created new types of atrocity, such as forcing peasants to collectivize their land and turn over most of the profits to the state.¹⁹ Furthermore, in these rural communities it was predominantly peasant women who bore the brunt of the over-accumulation.²⁰ On the one hand, women were mobilized to participate in agricultural production in the name of gender equality. On the other, due to a lack of state support and persistent social customs, they were still obliged to perform unpaid reproductive labor, which "decreased the necessary labor time needed to reproduce workers' life and labor power, and thus increased surplus labor time, i.e., the time from which profit could be extracted".²¹

Even in urban areas, where socialist welfare regimes offered better labor protection and more developed public services, women's reproductive labor still subsidized the overall accumulation. Without an effective challenge to the perceived physiological differences between men and women, women continued to be viewed as secondary workers and primary caregivers.²² In the public domain, they were concentrated in light industries and service sectors, which often paid less compared to men's occupations. At home, they continued to undertake a range of unpaid reproductive labor, effectively subsidizing the underdeveloped welfare regime. This cultural association between women's work and social reproduction was further enhanced, ironically, by state policies that protected women's "special needs" at work and granted generous maternity leave to mothers.

¹⁷For instance, according to Alexandra Kollontai, one of the key architects of the communist program of women's liberation, women should not be confined to "restricted tasks of home economics, household duties, etc." but pursue "creative tasks in the sphere of production". See Alexandra Kollontai, *Alexandra Kollontai: Selected Writings* (New York, NY, 1977 [1916]), p. 183.

¹⁸Wendy Z. Goldman, "Introduction: Primitive Accumulation and Socialism", *International Review of Social History*, 67:2 (2022), pp. 195–209.

¹⁹*Idem*, "Blood on the Red Banner: Primitive Accumulation in the World's First Socialist State", *International Review of Social History*, 67:2 (2022), pp. 211–229.

²⁰Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley, CA, 2011); Jacob Eyferth, "Women's Work and the Politics of Homespun in Socialist China, 1949–1980", *International Review of Social History*, 57:3 (2012), pp. 365–391; *idem*, "State Socialism and the Rural Household".

²¹*Idem*, "State Socialism and the Rural Household", p. 249.

²²Gail W. Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (Berkeley, CA, 1978); Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State & Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge, 1993); Sarah Ashwin, "Women's Lives under Socialism", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 50 (2002), pp. 261–273; Eva Fodor, "Smiling Women and Fighting Men: The Gender of the Communist Subject in State Socialist Hungary", *Gender & Society*, 16:2 (2002), pp. 240–263.

While existing analyses have sufficiently illustrated why women's work is functional to capital accumulation in both capitalist and state-socialist economies, they pay less attention to tensions between the system's accumulation needs and women's agency from the realm of social reproduction. The next section reviews key literature on gender politics in relation to the political economy in socialist China, establishing that the current study can help elucidate the dynamics between accumulation logic and historical agency.

Women's Work, Reproductive Labor, and Industrial Accumulation in Socialist China

Similar to women in pre-capitalist Europe, those in late imperial China performed a full range of household activities that either supported family subsistence or directly generated cash income. For example, in the Yangtze Delta and the Pearl River Delta, Han Chinese women not only undertook all the reproductive tasks in the household, but they also did home spinning and weaving of both cotton and silk products, which served as an important source of income.²³ Then, the first wave of industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century saw home-spun textiles and other women's handicrafts replaced by factory manufacturing, contributing to the devaluation of Chinese women's domestic work.²⁴ This transformation culminated in the middle of the century when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over the country.

The CCP's gender programs were motivated by two factors. First, founded upon Marxist–Leninist doctrines, the CCP conceived “liberating” women from the household and making them participate in politics and the formal economy as an integral part of the larger agenda of creating a classless society. Second, to achieve ambitious goals in industrialization and agricultural development, the CCP sometimes treated women as “a reserve army of labor”, the tapping of which would be a necessary means to accelerate accumulation. Therefore, under the banner of “women can hold up half the sky”,²⁵ industrial and agricultural projects nationwide incorporated an unprecedented number of women into the labor force.²⁶ Consequently, images of the “iron girls” started to circulate and inspired many women to thrive in traditionally male-dominated fields.

²³Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, CA, 1997); Kenneth Pomeranz, “Women's Work and the Economics of Respectability”, in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (eds), *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Lanham, MD, 2005), pp. 239–264; Janice Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China 1860–1930* (Stanford, CA, 1989).

²⁴Eyferth, “Women's Work and the Politics of Homespun”.

²⁵Xueping Zhong, “Women Can Hold Up Half the Sky”, in Ban Wang (ed.), *Words and Their Stories: Essays on the Language of the Chinese Revolution* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 227–247.

²⁶Throughout the Mao era, there were tensions between the two agendas, that is, liberating women and treating them as a “reserve army of labor”. In the 1950s and early 1960s, women were hired or fired depending on the regime's economic boom or bust. After 1963, the state changed to a more stable employment policy that aimed to offer all able-bodied men and women in urban areas permanent employment.

To facilitate “women’s liberation” and economic development, the CCP was also determined to transform the domain of social reproduction. While earlier literature held that the domestic domain was neglected in the party’s vision about building socialism, recent studies have revealed a more complicated and nuanced picture. In a nutshell, similar to other state-socialist regimes, socialist China also witnessed a form of “primitive accumulation” that was based on undercompensating or free riding on the work of peasants, informal workers, and other groups, including rural women and urban housewives.

Jacob Eyferth shows that, in the countryside, women’s work – from growing sideline crops to making shoes and clothes – played essential roles in maintaining households’ daily subsistence and therefore subsidizing the “socialist development regime” that featured extremely high rates of accumulation and low rates of consumption.²⁷ While the state extracted eighty to ninety per cent of the rural surplus above subsistence consumption to feed the urban population and reinvest in industrialization, it did not return the industrial surplus to the rural areas.²⁸ Instead, it was through making rural women work longer hours after the day shift that the demand for basic consumer goods was met.

Compared to their rural counterparts, the labor of urban housewives was less extracted, as the state provided for some aspects of their subsistence. This provision came in the form of food ration coupons, public housing, healthcare, and other state-subsidized services. However, urban women’s contribution to accumulation remained crucial. During this period, according to Gail Hershatter, the “domestic” was totally separated from the public and neglected by the party-state at the discursive level.²⁹ However, Shaopeng Song’s pioneering research on *jiashu* shows that, on the one hand, the state made urban *jiashu* a distinct political constituent, reckoning the importance of their labor in building socialism; on the other hand, it intentionally kept the boundary between the public and the domestic and never challenged the gendered divisions of labor within and across the two spheres.³⁰ To a large extent, *jiashu* labor – including cooking, childrearing, growing sideline plots, and making basic consumer goods – was deemed to be their “natural” duty, rather than generating any form of economic value. Song concludes that by appropriating *jiashu* free labor, the state was able to keep both workers’ wages and welfare redistribution low, so that it could reinvest most of the profits in industrial production.

While the devaluation of women’s work was aligned with the logic of accumulation, women in the early PRC indeed had agency, navigating various political and social spaces. In her research on Chinese socialist feminism, Wang Zheng shows that the preservation of urban *jiashu* domesticity and the undervaluation of their

²⁷Eyferth, “Women’s Work and the Politics of Homespun”; *idem*, “State Socialism and the Rural Household”.

²⁸Julia Chuang and John Yasuda, “Polanyi and the Peasant Question in China: State, Peasant, and Land Relations in China, 1949–present”, *Politics & Society*, 50:2 (2022), pp. 311–347.

²⁹Gail Hershatter, “Making the Visible Invisible: The Fate of ‘the Private’ in Revolutionary China”, in Lü Fangshan (ed.), *Wusheng zhisheng (I). Jindai Zhongguo de funü yu guojia, 1600–1950* (Taipei, 2003), pp. 257–279.

³⁰Song, “The State Discourse on Housewives and Housework in the 1950s in China”, pp. 49–63; *idem*, *Chinese Modernity and Socialist Feminist Theory*.

reproductive work by the state was not simply what the regime of accumulation needed.³¹ Unpacking the seemingly monolithic state, Wang analyzes the political struggle between the state feminists and the male party leaders in Beijing. She reveals that the naturalization of *jiashu*'s domesticity was a result of the state feminists' survival strategy during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, in which their institutional establishment, the All-China Women's Federations (ACWF), was on the brink of being abolished.

Attending to both political economy and historical agency, this study turns to the convoluted relationship between the lived experience of *jiashu* and the turbulent unfolding of the accumulation strategies from 1949 to the aftermath of the GLF in 1962. In other words, the goal of this article is to use an empirical case study to substantiate the dynamic relationship between political economy and historical agency in shaping *jiashu* experience and the landscape of reproductive labor in this period. In the following sections, I investigate how the state's changing accumulation strategies interacted with its unsettling efforts to transform *jiashu* while continuously redrawing the boundary between production and social reproduction and that between paid and unpaid labor. Shifting the focus away from national-level discourse and major metropolises, this study draws on the local case of Zhengzhou. The capital city of Henan province and one of the largest nationwide today, Zhengzhou was a young cotton-mill town at the dawn of the Mao era.³²

Located on the south bank of the middle-lower Yellow River and eighty kilometers east of Kaifeng, Zhengzhou had remained a modest city in the late imperial period. During the first decade of the twentieth century, it rose as an industrial town when the ambitious nationalist-industrialist Mu Ouchu expanded his textile business from Shanghai to Zhengzhou, opening the Yufeng Cotton Mill there. Mu chose Zhengzhou because it was expected that the overall costs of cotton production there would be low. The two newly built major railways, Jinghan and Longhai, crossed in Zhengzhou, offering economical transportation; Henan was an important cotton-growing region and a populous province, providing cheap raw materials as well as cheap labor. Despite initial industrial development, wars, famines, and frequent floods in the following decades rendered the city almost a blank slate when the CCP took it over in 1948. As the new regime planned to shift the center of industrial production inland from the coastal regions, partially due to strategic security considerations, Zhengzhou resumed industrialization, joining Shijiazhuang, Xianyang, and others to become one of the six national textile centers.

In the first decade of the PRC, in addition to the reopening of Yufeng, five new cotton mills and dozens of supporting factories, including dyeing and textile machinery, were built in Zhengzhou. The city's population increased sixfold, from 150,000 to about one million in 1960.³³ The workforce was composed of a small portion of experienced workers relocated from far away industrial cities, such as

³¹Wang Zheng, "Dilemmas of Inside Agitators: Chinese State Feminists in 1957", *The China Quarterly*, 188 (2016), pp. 913–932; *idem*, *Finding Women in the State*, pp. 54–77.

³²Zhengzhou became the capital of Henan in 1954. Before that, the capital was Kaifeng.

³³Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Tongji Ju yu Gongan Bu, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo renkou tongji ziliao huibian, 1949–1985* (Beijing, 1988).

Shanghai, Qingdao, and Wuhan, and a large number of young peasants recruited from nearby villages; approximately sixty per cent of the employees were women. As newcomers to Zhengzhou, most workers settled in the living compounds adjacent to the factories, and each of the factories became an industrial work unit, or *danwei*. As a nationwide mode of organizing and controlling labor production and social reproduction, *danwei* offered an elaborate range of welfare provisions, including healthcare, housing, and children's education.³⁴ Many workers in this study indicated that they spent their entire lives in the same *danwei*, marrying, raising children, and retiring, even though these state factories stopped operating after the mid-2000s.

The following sections are organized in chronological order, tracing *jiashu* experiences through the initial industrialization stage (1949–1957), the GLF and the accompanying Urban People's Commune movement (1958–1962), and the retrenchment that immediately followed. However, rather than trying to explain such changes based on periodization, I attend to variations across time to elucidate how the subjects, meaning, and boundaries of reproductive labor have been historically constructed and reconstructed.

Red Housekeeping in the *Danwei* Compound

“As a *jiashu*, one must strive to be ‘red,’ diligent, dexterous, and frugal (*hong, qin, qiao, jian*), so that she can become a ‘red housekeeper’ (*hongse guanjiaren*)!” In January 1962, Wang Yuxi, the Head of the Women's Department of the Zhengzhou Trade Union, gave a speech at a meeting, encouraging members to “*qinjian jianguo, qinjian chijia*” [diligently, frugally build the country, and diligently, frugally manage the family] – also known as “*liangqin*” [two diligences].³⁵ This was not the first time the “two diligences” were brought up. Emphasizing urban women's crucial role in housekeeping and linking it to socialist nation-building, the “two diligences” campaign was first launched in 1957 by the ACWF.

Compared to the ACWF's initial agenda of “mobilizing women to participate in production as a means of achieving women's liberation”, which was part of the socialist revolution's founding principles, the emphasis on women's domesticity is quite puzzling at first glance. According to Wang Zheng, this sudden conservative turn in 1957 was a strategic move that state feminists made to protect themselves from being abolished by the male-dominated top party officials.³⁶ This section, however, shows that the ACWF shifted from organizing women workers to *jiashu* long before 1957, and, through this process, *jiashu* positions also became fixed in the domestic space.

When the CCP returned to the cities in the late 1940s, most urban women were not “proletarian industrial workers” who would easily fit the revolutionary imaginary.

³⁴Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, NY, 1997); Mark W. Frazier, *The Making of the Chinese Industrial Workplace: State, Revolution, and Labor Management* (Cambridge, 2004); Duanfang Lu, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form: Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949–2005* (London, 2006).

³⁵Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 026–106–23 (March 1962).

³⁶Wang, *Finding Women in the State*, pp. 54–77.

Rather, the demographic composition of urban women was complex, including handicraftswomen, peddlers, sex workers, intellectuals, laborers in service sectors, and family members of the old capitalists and bourgeois professionals.³⁷ As of 1953, the total number of female employees in all of China's state-owned industrial enterprises was 2,132,000, accounting for only six per cent of the entire urban female population.³⁸

In barely industrialized inland cities like Zhengzhou, the majority of the estimated 150,000 inhabitants in late 1948 were poor manual laborers and refugees. According to the Zhengzhou Women's Federation (ZWF), there were about 60,000 women in the city. Except for a small number of factory workers, sex workers, and housewives of railway workers, all were "poor working women" (*pinku laodong funü*). Most of them had fled war and famine and settled in Zhengzhou by marrying peddlers, rickshaw pullers, and other types of manual laborers.³⁹

Facing a devastated economy with a high unemployment rate and complex class composition, the ZWF believed that their central task should be organizing the *jiashu* of the poor manual laborers to "self-rescue by participating in production" (*shengchan zijiu*). The ZWF's work began at the most grassroots level, bringing unemployed women together and establishing workshops for shoemaking, hand spinning of linen, sewing, and washing clothes in exchange for cash income.⁴⁰ In the first few months of 1949, the ZWF mobilized more than 7,000 women to participate in these activities.

However, by the mid-1950s, the reach of the ZWF shrank to the sphere of reproduction, as the landscape of the labor force thoroughly changed in Zhengzhou. Between 1953 and 1958, six modern textile mills and a series of supporting enterprises went into production one after another. Tens of thousands of spinners and weavers, as well as technicians and cadres, came to and settled in Zhengzhou; the majority of the workers were women aged between eighteen and twenty-five years old.

As a socialist industrial city was in the making, the seemingly "petty" forms of production, such as handicraft, would soon be diminished.⁴¹ The category of "poor working women" also waned in the discourse of the local women's federation. It was against this backdrop that *jiashu* emerged as a major category referring to unemployed family members, mostly women, in the *danwei* system. Although many

³⁷For research on the dynamic lives of this diverse population, see Zhao Ma, *Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937–1949* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); Weikun Cheng, *City of Working Women: Life, Space, and Social Control in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing* (Berkeley, CA, 2011); Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley, CA, 1997).

³⁸Zhonghua Quanguo Funü Lianhehui yanjiusuo yu Shaanxi Sheng Funü Lianhehui yanjiushi, *Zhongguo funü tongji ziliao, 1949–1989* (Beijing, 1991), p. 241.

³⁹Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029–001–012 (February 1949).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 029–001–008 (June 1949).

⁴¹By the end of 1956, the urban population in Zhengzhou had grown to 410,000, one third of whom were employed by state-owned or collective enterprises, with women accounting for seventeen per cent. At this time, all the work-unit employees were from 57,432 households city-wide. Households of work-unit employees accounted for sixty-eight per cent of the total urban residents' households. See Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, Zhengzhoushi Zonggonghui yu Zhengzhoushi Fulian Jiashu Gongzuo Huiyi Huibao (30 December 1956).

older, less educated women would continue making shoes, sewing, tailoring, and washing clothes to bring home extra income, they were not considered “working women” but only *jiashu*. In other words, their identity was essentially associated with social reproduction, although their labor was not exclusively so.

Parallel with the “domestication” of *jiashu* was the shutting off of the ACWF’s influence from the industrial *danwei* system. While the ACWF was the first to incorporate *jiashu* into their agenda of woman-work,⁴² according to advice co-issued by the ACWF and the All-China Federation of Trade Union (ACFTU) in 1951, *jiashu* should *primarily* be organized by the factory trade union while being *assisted* by the women’s federation.⁴³ In late 1954, a reorganization of the ZWF departments took place, in which the production department was eliminated because “it organized and mobilized female workers within the factories and thus functionally overlapped with [the function of] the factory trade union”. Moreover, “since supporting social production was the overarching goal of our society as a whole, it would be redundant to set up a specific department designated for production”.⁴⁴

In 1956, the ACWF launched the “five virtues” (*wuhao*) campaign to help frontline workers achieve the production goals of the first Five-Year Plan (Figure 1). It called on *jiashu* to “manage the home thriftily”, “build solidarity within and among families”, “provide good education to children”, “take good care of hygiene and sanitation”, and “attend literacy classes”.⁴⁵ As Cai Chang, the Chair of the ACWF, stated, “*jiashu* of the workers should take a socialist approach to family issues. [They] should join the ‘five virtues’ campaign without hesitation, helping their husband and other family members to accomplish the national production plan”.⁴⁶

In the textile industry, since most single or young mothers were employed in the production sector, *jiashu* were usually older women who migrated with their children or husbands from villages. Besides cooking and taking care of the grandchildren, many of them joined sewing and laundry groups. For instance, by 1953 there were seventy-one *jiashu* in the Zhengzhou Number Two Mill, ten of whom were domestic maids and the rest were the wives of workers. The welfare department of the factory organized them into seven small groups to provide collective services to the workers, and fifteen were paid to wash clothes. While in the past, *jiashu* had been washing clothes for their own family members, now, *in addition* to continuing to do that, they offered such services to many new hires who

⁴²Following Delia Davin, I use “woman-work” when translating *funü gongzuo*, which covers all sorts of activities that the CCP sponsored to empower women, including revolutionary struggle, production, legal reform, and literacy and hygiene campaigns. See Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Oxford, 1979).

⁴³Zhonghua Quanguo Zonggonghui yu Zhonghua Quanguo Minzhu Funü Lianhehui, “Guanyu nügong jì zhìgong jiashu gongzuo lingdao guanxi de lianhe tongzhi”, in Zhonghua funü ganbu guanli xueyuan (ed.), *Zhongguo funü yundong wenxian ziliao huibian, 1949–1983* (Beijing, 1988).

⁴⁴Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029-100-001 (13 October 1954); *ibid.*, ZMA: 029-025-002.

⁴⁵Cai Chang, “Zhìgong jiemei yao jìjì canjia xianjin shengchanzhe yundong”, in Zhonghua funü ganbu guanli xueyuan, *Zhongguo funü yundong wenxian ziliao huibian*, pp. 255–256.

⁴⁶Zhonghua Quanguo Zonggonghui Nügong Bu, “Jiashu ‘Wuhao’ Gongzuo”, in *Zhìgong jiashu gongzuo jingyan* (Beijing, 1957), pp. 1–14.



Figure 1 Poster of the ACWF's five virtues campaign. October 1957.
Source: ChinesePosters.net, with permission.

chose to outsource such chores. Therefore, the factory administrators believed that this was a good way for *jiashu* to ease the economic burdens of their spouses.⁴⁷

After 1956, when more peasants flooded into cities nationwide to live with their children or relatives, unions in industrial enterprises began organizing *jiashu* to grow sideline plots, raise pigs, and produce basic goods around the *danwei* compound. *Jiashu* were also the key labor resource for maintaining public hygiene and greening the environment. As quarterly reports on women workers and *jiashu* from the Zhengzhou Municipal Trade Union show, in 1956, citywide, *jiashu* were recruited to kill the “four pests”⁴⁸ and to plant trees and flowers in their neighborhoods. For example, in the second quarter of 1956, *jiashu* from 400 households from the Number Two Textile Mill dug out thirty kilograms of fly pupae, and those of the Textile Housing Construction Enterprise killed 500 mice and planted more than 2,000 trees around their neighborhoods.⁴⁹

Jiashu not only contributed their free or modestly paid labor to maintaining and developing the collective space, but they were also at the center of developing the networks of financial mutual aids within the *danwei* community. As wages were generally low, every factory had to set up its own mutual aid fund. Each participating household was asked to contribute ten to twenty yuan per month to

⁴⁷Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029-015-008 (8 June 1953).

⁴⁸Usually considered part of the Great Leap Forward, the “Four Pests” campaign started in Zhengzhou as early as 1956. This infamous movement asked the masses to exterminate the following four animals considered harmful to agricultural production and public hygiene: rats; flies; mosquitoes; and sparrows.

⁴⁹Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 026-046-015 (June 1956); *ibid.*, 026-046-003 (September 1956).

the collective account, and then, once a year, they were able to borrow a large sum of money from the fund for purposes such as weddings, children's medical bills, funerals, and travel.⁵⁰ Typically, it was *jiashu* who took care of bookkeeping for their households. As of 1956, forty per cent of the *danwei* in Zhengzhou had established their own mutual aid funds. The number of *danwei*-based mutual aid funds increased from 301 in 1957 to 1,423 in 1961, and the number of participating households increased from 39,239 to 72,602, respectively. This type of network was most developed around the large textile mills, where workers and *jiashu* lived in close proximity to one another. Often, *jiashu* who managed to save the most money and spend the least would be praised by the *danwei* trade union.⁵¹

Between 1949 and 1957, most of the work done by *jiashu* was not considered to be production and was thus compensated in only a very modest way – if at all. During this period, few women older than forty could find a regular-paying job. For them, working in a state-run textile mill and earning a relatively high wage was such a luxury that only their much younger, better-educated counterparts could enjoy it. However, the GLF in the summer of 1958, and the following Urban People's Commune movement, profoundly reconfigured the *jiashu* position in the myriad of productive, reproductive labor, and paid/unpaid work.

Building a Big Socialist Family: *Jiashu* in the Urban People's Commune Movement

Before the “two diligences” campaign could fully materialize in 1957, the next year saw the coming of the GLF. Under the banner of “women can hold up half the sky”, the radical initiative pushed an unprecedented number of Chinese women into production – the domestic-centered discourse of “two diligences” suddenly faltered.

To speed up industrial accumulation and surpass Great Britain, in November 1957, Mao announced in Moscow that the new development approach would adopt a radical model to accelerate accumulation by further collectivizing production, intensifying labor, and minimizing redistribution. This approach abandoned central rationing and required local governments and enterprises to become self-reliant. The People's Commune was an institutional innovation that developed primarily in rural areas and, to a lesser extent and for less time, in cities, seeking to combine production and social reproduction and to collectivize the latter so that the state would not need to spend any money on welfare provisions.

⁵⁰These strategies had their roots in the practice of traditional rotating saving and credit accounts (ROSCA), as described by Matt Lowenstein, “Risk Management in Prewar China: A Study of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) in Qing Dynasty and Republican-era Shanxi Province”, *Business History*, 2023. doi: 10.1080/00076791.2023.2222662.

⁵¹Similar state mobilization of housewives in saving for the purpose of helping the general economy could also be observed in early twentieth-century Japan and the US during the Great Depression. However, while housewives in the latter two cases were seen by the state primarily as consumers, *jiashu* in the Chinese case were not seen as consumers, as defined in a capitalist context. For the Japanese case, see Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life* (Princeton, NJ, 1998); for the American case, see Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920–1945* (Philadelphia, PA, 2010).

It was in this historical context that the CCP's zeal in mobilizing *jiashu* to enter the public space cumulated. To the top leaders, mobilizing women to join the GLF consisted of two components. First, a significant portion of young women who had already been working outside the home should substitute for their male counterparts, who were now undertaking new industrial and construction projects that required more intensive labor or complicated technology. Second, for *jiashu*, who had never had formal jobs but made up the majority of the urban women's population, their tasks now were to join production or collectivized social reproduction. While a small portion of *jiashu* would work in state-run enterprises, the rest self-organized into small factories, manufacturing workshops, service collectives, childcare centers, and public canteens within the *danwei* or neighborhoods-turned-communes.

At the beginning of the GLF, the Party's top leaders proposed one of the most novel plans for collectivizing reproductive labor. In a lengthy speech delivered at the ACWF on 14 June 1958, Liu Shaoqi spoke of the relationship between liberating women's labor and advancing production:⁵²

We liberate women from domestic chores not because we are doing women a favor; instead, this is for overall production, social progress, and achieving communism, all of which require women to be liberated from domestic labor. Thus, I'm proposing this solution: to build as many care centers, public canteens, and public services as we can [...] While the primary goal is to organize production, can't we also organize urban *jiashu* and rural women to transform our daily life and services?

Liu singled out the *jiashu* role to further justify his proposal:

When I visited workers' living compounds in Shanghai, I saw small children everywhere, running around like ants and making a lot of noise. *Jiashu*, having to take care of them, prepare meals, and do laundry every day, were unhappy and bored. Some would rather cook and babysit for others. Why? Because they thought that rearing one's own children is "domestic labor", while taking care of others' is "social labor"; the latter is equal to a factory job.

Liu suggested that *jiashu* collectivize cooking, laundry, tailoring, shoemaking, and childcare. To him, the sphere of social reproduction could be subjugated to the same logic of mass production: "Collective service is not merely consumption; it is also about production. Cooking can be regarded as a form of production – it is food production, or the food industry. Clothing repair is like machinery repair; haircut is also a kind of repair. In a nutshell, these are all socially necessary".⁵³ Liu also mentioned in passing that, after reproductive labor was collectivized, the "technological revolution" should follow suit, as was occurring in the production sphere.

⁵²"Liu Shaoqi's Speech at the Party Committee of the ACWF", Database for the History of Contemporary Chinese Political Movements (DHCCPM)". Available at: [ccrd.usc.cuhk.edu.hk.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/PrintVersion.aspx?H=g2ajpzws&A=nqoomagk&D=352111144&M=vvj1ftbv](http://ccrd.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/proxy1.library.jhu.edu/PrintVersion.aspx?H=g2ajpzws&A=nqoomagk&D=352111144&M=vvj1ftbv); last accessed 2 April 2019.

⁵³*Ibid.*

In the same month when Liu Shaoqi gave the above speech, Zhengzhou saw the incipient development of the Red Flag Commune, the first of its kind in the nation.⁵⁴ Following the Red Flag, in August, another prominent commune was established that combined the Zhengzhou Textile Machinery Factory and several nearby neighborhoods. Despite their appearances in local newspapers and internal circulations within the Party, these earliest developments were not publicized nationwide until two years later, in 1960.⁵⁵ It was in the spring of this year, when Mao and his allies attempted to provide a “second push” to keep the GLF going amid the economic crisis and resulting famine, that the Urban People’s Commune became a national movement.⁵⁶ It was also in this year that five textile cotton mills in Zhengzhou jointly formed one meta commune – the Textile People’s Commune – which was short-lived and was never voluntarily brought up by my interviewees.⁵⁷

At the national level, the number of women employees in state-run enterprises and public agencies increased from 3.3 million in 1957 to ten million in 1959. Within the state industrial sector alone the number increased from 1.3 to 4.9 million.⁵⁸ In a survey among twenty-two provinces and cities, 730,000 collective factories and workshops were established and eighty-five per cent of the members were women. Another survey among twenty-one cities across the nation showed that 535,000 *jiashu* joined public production and service work in 1958. As of May 1960, five million people were working in the communes, eighty per cent of whom were *jiashu*.⁵⁹

In Zhengzhou, according to the local women’s federation, 63,526 people were “liberated” from the home, and eighty-two per cent were *jiashu*. Among these *jiashu*, 14,000 got jobs in state-run industrial enterprises or their affiliated service sectors; the rest, about two thirds, were asked to self-organize commune-based industrial workshops and welfare services.⁶⁰ To *jiashu*, working in the state-run enterprises, even as contract workers instead of permanent ones, was still much more desirable than joining the collective workshops and service sectors, as the former offered higher wages, better benefits, and social prestige.

In the Zhengzhou Textile Machinery Commune (ZTM Commune), there were 1,421 *jiashu* from 1,352 households, aged between twenty and fifty, with 309 over fifty years old. While forty-two of them had high-school diplomas and thirty-one had primary-school certificates, the vast majority were illiterate. About a quarter of them worked in the state sector, but most typically worked in cotton mills as trainees or contract workers; the rest stayed in the commune to work.

Deemed “unemployable” before the GLF, now the state considered all these *jiashu* as “able to produce”. Without concrete plans from higher officials about what exactly

⁵⁴Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029–035–202 (16 November 1958).

⁵⁵“Qiyi renmin gongshe de dansheng”, *Zhengzhou ribao*, 28 October 1958, p. 1; “Yici weidate shehui biange. Ji Zhengzhou Fangzhi Jixiechang Renmin Gongshe de dansheng”, *Neibu cankao*, 18 September 1958, pp. 3–15.

⁵⁶For the first appearance of the Red Flag Commune as a model in national media, see “Ba chengshi renmin jinyibu zuzhi qilai jianshe shehuizhuyi xinchengshi”, *Renmin ribao*, 7 April 1960.

⁵⁷Zhengzhou Disi Mianfangzhi Chang, *Zhengzhou Simian Zhi* (Zhengzhou, 1989), p. 311.

⁵⁸*Zhongguo funü tongji ziliao*, p. 241.

⁵⁹Geng, *Zhongguo Gongchandang funü gongzuo shi*, Vol. 2 (Beijing, 2016), pp. 194–195.

⁶⁰Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029–032–005 (5 September 1959).

to do, the grassroots commune leaders and the masses started experimenting with a variety of production and service work. Approximately 240 *jiashu* began working in industrial and agricultural production, while the rest were put in charge of running the forty canteens and 101 care service facilities, ranging from large-scale care centers with hundreds of children to mutual aid groups. The latter included a type of in-home service where one elderly woman took care of three to five children (for an image of an earlier mutual aid group, see Figure 2). In total, there were 128 care workers, offering services to 1,550 children, seventy-two per cent of whom were children in need of care services in the ZTM Commune itself.

By relocating cooking, childrearing, and household chores to the collective space, the commune system had transgressed the public–domestic boundary. Yet, it was not easy to shatter the value hierarchy of productive and reproductive labor. Wages for staff in these newly created care services depended on whether they were formal employees of the mill or *jiashu* recruited from the commune. While the former could earn between thirty-nine and forty-eight yuan per month, depending on credentials and seniority, the latter’s wages were between just fifteen and eighteen yuan. Moreover, while permanent employees enjoyed full reimbursement for their medical bills, these *jiashu* were reimbursed only half of the costs. In addition, they consistently received fewer ration coupons for food and other necessities.⁶¹

From the state’s viewpoint, collectivizing social reproduction could have saved reproductive labor that was done by *jiashu* before the GLF. In the urban commune, with more efficient ways of doing social reproduction, more *jiashu* could be freed from social reproduction and join production, accelerating accumulation in general. As Liu Shaoqi told the women cadres blatantly, this was not to “do women a favor” but to increase the “productivity” of social reproduction. However, due to the following reasons, this approach to collectivizing social reproduction did not work out and *jiashu* resistance to such arrangements to a large extent explained the unpopularity of the urban communes.

First, it seems that the efficiency in social reproduction that the commune was supposed to bring about was not due to any “labor-saving technology”, as the top leaders had hoped, but came at the cost of quality of service. To be clear, attempts to mechanize food processing were made. As early as June 1958, canteens in rural Henan were reported to have invented machines to make noodles, chop vegetables, and shred sweet potatoes.⁶² However, no similar measures were found in Zhengzhou’s canteens. Sewing collectives asked *jiashu* to use their own sewing machines in their work, which, arguably, would make clothes-making more efficient.⁶³ Yet, for interpersonal services such as childcare, labor saving was based solely on reducing the service per capita ratio. When care work was based in the household, the caregiver–child ratio was approximately 1:2 or 1:3. But now, it dropped to 1:15 in the daycare centers and 1:10 in the kindergartens. With such a

⁶¹Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 026–209–002 (20 September 1962).

⁶²Hu Sheng, “Jiawu laodong de shehuihua he jitihua”, *Hongqi* (1958), p. 7.

⁶³Interview with Wang Guangliang, 22 October 2016. This is based on Wang’s recollection of his mother’s experience as a *jiashu* during the GLF.



Figure 2 “Jiashu self-organized into mutual aid groups. Their services for frontline workers, including washing their clothes, cleaning their bedding, and especially taking care of those who were sick, has boosted workers’ enthusiasm in production.”

Source: Chinese Textile Workers, volume 13, July 1953.

low caregiver-child ratio, many parents were concerned about their children’s safety and health, hence withdrawals occurred frequently.

Second, since the state did not plan to subsidize these public services, communes had to resort to their own members to jumpstart these facilities. The ZTM Commune asked fifty households to give away their homes to set up new canteens; it also asked each commune member to contribute one to three yuan to secure the “startup” fund; moreover, for the first two months, *jiashu* providing public services were not compensated but instead were “volunteers”.⁶⁴

⁶⁴Gongshe dangwei xuanchuanbu, *Zhengzhou Fangzhi Jixiechang Renmin Gongshe ziliao huiji* (Zhengzhou, 1958), p. 22.

After the initial stage, these care facilities were also run primarily on fees collected from workers. On average, sending a child to the collective care center would cost ten yuan per month, including meals. With the exception of two productive workers-turned-caregivers, whose wages were paid by the factory, all other staff members and daily maintenance workers were paid by fees collected from children's parents. For reference, the monthly wage of a spinner or weaver, which was the most typical job held by a woman in the state mills, was between forty-nine and sixty yuan. In the late 1950s, most textile workers had families with two or three small children. Thus, for a dual-income family with an estimated total income of 100 yuan, sending all children to the care facilities (twenty to thirty yuan) would cost one fifth to one third of the family income, a portion too high to be considered feasible in the eyes of many parents. Thus, while, in theory, fees collected from parents should have been enough to run the care facilities, in reality some facilities had trouble enrolling enough children to sustain themselves.⁶⁵

Third, the wages received by those *jiashu* now working in the public domain were at the bottom of the pay scale, approximately thirty to forty yuan per month.⁶⁶ In 1958, the Number Four Mill recruited fifty-three *jiashu* to staff their childcare facilities. These *jiashu* complained that "doing childcare work was not secure. You could be removed from the position any time, and you would not be eligible for trade union membership. You don't have working years counted toward seniority for pension matters. You don't even have an employee ID card!" With strong resentment, some temporary care workers even hoarded food that should have been served to the children.⁶⁷

Even for permanent employees in the state-run mills, low pay for childcare work made it a job that most people tried to avoid. Young graduates hoped not to be assigned to a kindergarten job, which they viewed as indicative of lower status and "no future". Due to a lack of care work staff, some women who had worked in the frontline workshops were relocated to care centers. Feeling upset, one of them grumbled, "Now, my wage is 46.7 yuan a month, which is the lowest in my workshop but the highest in the care center! In the future, when the economy gets better, wages in the workshop will increase, but I bet that in the care center they will not".⁶⁸

Due to the hierarchy between productive work and service work, most *jiashu* preferred employment in a workshop and learning a technical skill, such as carpentry, over serving in the canteens or care centers. One of them refused to join the canteen and said, "I've been working around the stove for my whole life. No more cooking!" Another complained, "Hasn't babysitting in the home been enough? Why are you still asking me to do that [outside the home]?"⁶⁹

⁶⁵Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029-051-023 (10 February 1962). Based on the investigation by the ZWF, in 1961 seven out of twenty-five commune-run care centers surveyed were shut down due to lack of enrollees.

⁶⁶Note that of the 10.5 yuan/month kindergarten fee, 6.5 would go to food costs. Given that the caregiver to child ratio was 1:10, it seemed that most of the revenue had gone to care workers' wages (30-40 yuan).

⁶⁷Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029-050-023 (20 September 1960).

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Gongshe dangwei xuanchuanbu, *Zhengzhou Fangzhi Jiexiechang Renmin Gongshe Ziliao Huiji*, pp. 8-9.

Adding to all the above-mentioned problems, collectivization, including the concentration of cooking and childcare, did not necessarily reduce families' costs of social reproduction – instead, the opposite was often true. Indeed, some *jiashu* complained that joining the public canteen and using the childcare service had increased their spending, because all family members had to pay the canteen fee; in addition to paying care service fees, they also had to buy formula since breastfeeding was not possible.⁷⁰ For example, Sun Yulan began working in 1959 at the age of forty-four, and her monthly wage was twenty-four yuan. She had three children and the total cost of care service was thirty-six yuan, much more than she could earn.⁷¹ Theoretically, one could argue that, despite the relatively high cost, collectivization and remuneration of care work was an innovative way to transfer economic resources from the patriarchal community to women individuals. In reality, however, when the only legitimate unit of resource allocation remained the household, even women who started earning wages did not welcome this new arrangement. The extra income brought in by the wage-earning *jiashu* could not offset the extra cost of losing free domestic labor.

The Post-Leap Retrenchment and the Re-domestication of *Jiashu*

In June 1961, as the economic and social crises deepened, the most atrocious manifestation being the great famine in the countryside,⁷² the central Party shut down the GLF investment drive. In urban areas nationwide, with sharp budget cuts, about twenty-eight million urbanites consuming grain rations had been sent to the countryside by July 1963.⁷³ Within the same period, the number of female employees in state enterprises and public agencies was reduced by 3.5 million, that is, from ten million in 1960 to 6.5 million in 1963.⁷⁴ In 1962, among the 176,000 employees in state enterprises in Zhengzhou, 34,000 were laid off, approximately 11,000 of whom (thirty-four per cent) were women.⁷⁵ Of these women, 3,450 were *jiashu*, who would return to their urban homes. In the same year, among the total of 548,000 urban residents, approximately one tenth were sent to the countryside, one third of whom were *jiashu*.⁷⁶

⁷⁰Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029-050-013 (10 October 1962).

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²While the exact number of people who died as a result of the famine remains controversial (most estimates fall into the range of between 15–40 million), there is a consensus that this famine is one of the greatest human and economic catastrophes in history, with responsibility lying with the CCP. Felix Wemheuer, "Dealing with Responsibility for the Great Leap Famine in the People's Republic of China", *The China Quarterly*, 201 (2010), pp. 176–194.

⁷³Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962* (New York, 2013), Kindle version, p. 811.

⁷⁴Geng, *Zhongguo Gongchandang funü gongzuo shi*, p. 224.

⁷⁵Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029-050-013 (20 October 1962). Although this document does not provide the gender proportions of the layoffs at the municipal level, the author's calculation, based on numbers from the Gazetteer of Zhengzhou No. 4 Mill, can shed some light on this matter. In this mill, the percentage of female workers dropped from sixty-eight per cent in 1959 to fifty-seven per cent in 1962.

⁷⁶Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 029-050-013 (20 October 1962).

Responses to the retrenchment varied across groups. For *jiashu*, a small proportion (approximately twenty per cent) found it a relief to escape the temporary factory or commune job as long as they were allowed to stay in the city. These women were either physically weak or had too many children to look after. Some were from families in which the husband earned much more money and, as explained earlier, where it would actually be more economic for these families to have a *jiahsu* at home instead of sending their children to care facilities.⁷⁷

Other *jiashu*, although not particularly disappointed at the abrupt dissolution of the commune, expressed their willingness to continue performing a variety of service work in exchange for extra income, as they had been doing before the GLF. Through the assistance of the local residential committees and women's federation, they were able to begin vending street food, sewing cloth soles for shoes, doing in-house nanny work, knitting sweaters and bags, haircutting, doing hourly work in small workshops, and other similar jobs in their neighborhoods. On average, they could earn twenty-five to thirty yuan per month, similar to or even slightly higher than what they earned through their commune work. These jobs were also more flexible in terms of time and location; much of the work could be brought home to finish.

The strongest resistance to the retrenchment was from the more than 3,500 textile workers who had held permanent positions in the state mills before the GLF but who were now being asked to leave for good and become *jiashu*. Having enjoyed the economic and social prestige of being state workers, they saw the layoffs as both a large economic loss as well as a personal humiliation, worrying that their husbands would “look down upon” them. In the Number Five Mill, for instance, there were about a thousand *jiashu*-turned-workers who refused to be sent down. Their average age was thirty-nine, and they earned fifty yuan per month – quite a decent income – with an average of 3.7 children each. They pushed back strongly, citing the tremendous “financial burden” they would face if they lost their job. In the end, the Number Five Mill could not relocate them but kept them employed at the factory.⁷⁸

Soon after the end of the Urban People's Commune movement, the Zhengzhou Trade Union, in collaboration with the women's federation, resumed the “five virtues” and “two diligences” campaigns. This time, the entire industrial system was facing harsher conditions, with a worsening economy and severe scarcity. Once again, *jiashu* were asked to fulfill their role of “red housekeeping” to survive the hardship, by producing more sideline plots and basic consumer goods, as well as keeping a closer eye on each individual household's bookkeeping to make savings.

Not all developments in social services during the GLF were in vain. While the urban communes, with their makeshift canteens and care centers, all vanished, in the state-run factories many care facilities remained and continued to function. The number of childcare facilities in November 1961 dramatically dropped from 1,934

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* Evidence from other industries showed the same dynamic. Both workers and *jiashu* tended to push back hardest when they were requested to go back to the countryside. For instance, Shi Huajin, a male, skilled worker in an oil refinery, committed suicide on 1 May 1962 in protest at the order to send him down. Zhengzhou Municipal Archives, 026-099-010 (15 May 1962).

at the peak of the GLF to only 138 citywide. However, the total enrollment number in 1961 was 2.2 times higher than it was in 1957, and the staff number had increased from 603 to 2,616.⁷⁹ It seemed that the GLF had helped to cultivate a new sense of need among working parents, that is, the need for public care services. Having benefitted from such services, many of the frontline workers expected the factory to continue offering them.

In late 1961, after the readjustment of the national development strategy, state enterprises were allowed to spend more on welfare services, and care service fees were lowered, especially for children under three. In the ensuing four decades, kindergartens run by the state mills had become the best in Zhengzhou and even gained some fame internationally.⁸⁰ Overall, based on archival information and interviews, about half of working mothers had sent at least one of their children to the childcare facilities provided by the mills during the socialist period. Those who had to leave their children with other members of their families did so mainly for financial reasons.

Conclusion

Focusing on the lived experience of *jiashu* in a local community, this article is, firstly, an empirical account of an important yet overlooked group of people in the history of socialist China. It demonstrates that the work of *jiashu* was not only central to the formation of the socialist regime of accumulation, but that their struggles around the changing boundaries between the “public” and the “domestic”, as well as those between the “productive” and “reproductive” also partially contributed to derailing the GLF – one of Mao’s most ambitious projects.⁸¹ These findings can shed light on two fields of study, as outlined below.

First, this study advances our understanding of women’s work in relation to regimes of accumulation. Feminist political economy has revealed that, under capitalism, accumulation is not solely reliant on “exploitation” – that is, appropriating formal workers’ “surplus value” in the workplace while only paying the cost of workers’ self-reproduction – but it also operates through “expropriation” – that is, extracting fruits of uncompensated labor in extra-market arenas, such as colonialism, slavery, as well as “housewifization”.⁸² Such processes of “primitive accumulation” also happened

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 029–051–020 (30 March 1962).

⁸⁰In fact, as the author argues elsewhere, the heyday of collective care of the *danwei* was in the 1980s and early 1990s, when state enterprises were allowed to retain more profits and redistribute them within the *danwei*. See Yige Dong, “From Mill Town to iPhone City: Gender, Labor, and the Politics of Care in an Industrializing China (1949–2017)” (Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, 2019).

⁸¹Nancy Fraser’s concept “boundary struggles” is illuminating here. While Fraser highlights historical actors’ agency in contesting and shifting the arbitrary boundaries between different social spaces, my analysis emphasizes that when such boundaries were largely set and reset by the state during the Mao era, *jiashu* on the ground exercised their agency by conforming, questioning, or challenging those boundaries according to their own economic or social needs. For a discussion on “boundary struggles”, see Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care”, *New Left Review*, 100 (July/Aug 2016), pp. 99–117.

⁸²For an in-depth discussion of “exploitation” and “expropriation”, see Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet and What We Can Do about It* (New York, 2022).

in historically existing socialist societies, as recent literature suggests. In the case of “housewifization” specifically, in both systems, women’s unpaid work in the household was an essential constituent of the economy. In this regard, socialist China was no exception. However, as I show in this article, what is novel about it is that, in China, a more radical approach to expropriating women’s work arose during the short-lived Urban People’s Commune movement.

To top leaders like Liu Shaoqi, social reproduction itself should have been a site of “mass production” in order to accelerate industrial accumulation. In this new system, accumulation took place not only through diverting women’s labor power from the “unproductive” domestic sphere to the sphere of production; it also happened *within* the sphere of collectivized social reproduction. Through establishing urban people’s communes, the state replaced unevenly developing welfare programs with collectivized yet unsubsidized care and service labor, the majority of which was performed by former *jiashu*. In other words, the collectivization of reproduction in the urban commune was not only meant to free up more labor to enter production, but it was also to turn social reproduction itself into a site of “mass production”, latently following the same logic of concentration and centralization that dictates modern industrial production.

However, unlike the sphere of mass production, where mechanization and automation had already been introduced and were arguably advanced as a result of the “technological revolution” that characterized the GLF, the realm of social reproduction was much more difficult to mechanize due to the interpersonal, service-based nature of its labor process. To boost “efficiency”, communes had to resort to an alternative approach, that is, reducing the number of care workers per recipient, at the expense of service quality. This arrangement, inevitably, led to considerable discontent and resistance. Overall, the reification of the production logic undermined the regime’s own purpose of quicker accumulation, as it failed to recognize that the logic of social life can never be reduced to that of the industrial economy.

Second, this study goes beyond the impact of structural forces on women and closely examines the interplay between political economy and historical agency. Despite their labor being expropriated by the regime, *jiashu* demonstrated remarkable agency amid the fluctuations of socialist industrialization. While the state’s discourse increasingly linked *jiashu* to domesticity and social reproduction, on the ground these women accomplished much more. In addition to tirelessly working around the clock at home, they also provided a range of services in the *danwei* and staffed both production workshops and collectivized reproductive facilities during the GLF. Their vital labor not only cared for the workers, but also held the community together.

Nevertheless, *jiashu* did not always conform to the expectations set by the party-state. As they had always worked for the survival of their families, *jiashu* were never the “parasites” of society that the state portrayed them to be. Whenever there was an opportunity to generate additional income for the household, they would seize it. However, when such work was imposed by the state and the trade-off became too burdensome, as demonstrated in the case of the GLF, *jiashu* pushed back. They complained about such coerced “liberation”, showed a reluctance to send their children to public care facilities, and withdrew from care jobs – the most

underpaid and precarious work among all types. Indeed, at times, they simply refused to take up those assignments. The fate of the Urban People's Commune movement might have been predetermined, as by the time it resurfaced in 1960 the nationwide famine had already reached its peak and the starving peasants could not continue subsidizing urbanites' work and life as they used to. Yet, the problems *endogenous* to the urban experiment and its participants' resistance to it are essential to our thorough understanding of this historical process.

My emphasis on the interactions between structure and agency and the respective consequences also highlights a fundamental message in critical gender studies. By applying a gender lens to examine history, we not only bring justice to those who were once marginalized by the hegemonic discourse, but we also offer a more comprehensive explanation of why historical processes unfold in certain ways. In the case at hand, without attending to the question of women's work and social reproduction, our examination of the Great Leap Forward would have been incomplete.