

**How to Survive in Wuhan:
Household Coping Strategies in China's Socialist Planned
Economy, 1961–1965**

by
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Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, people in Chinese cities have consistently talked about their daily economic activities, the prices of necessities, and the state's role in controlling commodities. This research puts money at the centre, exploring domestic economic lives of the new generation of post-1949 young employees in state offices who committed to the socialist project, and their connections with the development of the planned economy between 1961 and 1965. Using oral interviews, accompanied by historical sources from municipal archives, local gazetteers, and newspapers, this case study of Wuhan addresses two aims. First, while describing citizens' spending on food, strategies for saving and raising money, and participation in the grey economy, I present the complexity of memory and individual interpretations of the tension between policies and personal activities. Second, I look into how people lived, day to day, shaped by the political economic system, and explore how their family choices influenced the broader society.

Keywords: The planned economy; Household economy; Everyday life; Wuhan; Frugality; Grey economy

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List of Acronyms

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
GLF	Great Leap Forward
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROSCA	Rotating Savings and Credit Associations
WMA	Wuhan Municipal Archive

Introduction

In 1962, residents in Wuhan, an inland city of China, wrote a letter of complaint to Premier Zhou Enlai. They reported that grains and vegetable rations were insufficient. Even worse, grain stores provided products of poor quality and restricted the quantity of each purchase. Residents had to wait in line repeatedly to buy food or had to purchase what they needed in the black market at an exorbitant price. The residents requested that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increase grain distribution in Wuhan and assign officials to supervise the price and quality of vegetables.¹

In 2020, Wuhan citizens were still concerned about the supply and the prices of foods and other commodities. Rather than writing letters, citizens directly expressed their concerns to the government through social media. The entire city of Wuhan was in quarantine for around three months due to the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), shutting down transportation and restricting residents from going outside. The gates of each residential community were closed. The only access for residents to daily goods, especially fresh vegetables and meats, was through volunteers' scheduled door-to-door delivery. Meanwhile, due to the shortage in supply and the surge in citizens' requests to store food at home, the prices of daily necessities continuously increased. Some citizens posted pictures to complain about the exorbitant prices on personal social media platforms, such as Weibo and the Xiaohongshu.² The price of pork, for example, rose from 12 *yuan* per catty to around 50 *yuan* per catty. The posts of complaints accumulated while some citizens proposed that the state should adjust the prices and supply more

¹ Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan and Zhongyang dang'an guan, eds., *1958–1965 Zhonghua renmin gonghe guo jingji dang'an ziliao xuanbian* [Collection of financial archives of the People's Republic of China, 1958–1965] (Beijing: Zhongguo caizheng jingji chubanshe, 2011), 700.

² These two were popular platforms for individuals to share their thoughts and lives in public in China. See examples of the posts: Yinyuting de xiaofashi, "Maicai haogui" [Foods are expensive], Weibo, February 29, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220608223816/https://m.weibo.cn/status/4477337866884423>; Buhui youyong de yu, "Wuhan fengcheng diliutian, jintian shangwu maide shucai" [Wuhan lockdown day six, I bought vegetables today morning], Xiaohongshu, January 28, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/http://www.xiaohongshu.com/discovery/item/5e2fcdb0000000001006650>.

foods in Wuhan. Later the state offered frozen pork from the state's stock to Wuhan citizens, at 10 *yuan* per catty.³

Although the sociopolitical environment has changed drastically between 1962 and 2020, Wuhan dwellers kept talking about their daily economic activities, about the price of necessities and the state's role in controlling these commodities. Money has always been one of the important components of ordinary people's daily lives. The residents' economic lives were influenced by the social context, but citizens simultaneously took actions either to cope with difficulties in personal ways or to urge the government to adopt policies, hence changing society and improving living conditions. Urbanites' domestic consumption strategies between 1961 and 1965 occurred in the context of the state planned socialist economy, while citizens' actions also shaped the design and interpretation of economic policies. In this project, I put money at the centre of analysis, exploring ordinary Wuhan young couples' economic lives—particularly in their strategies of spending money—and their connections with the development of the planned economy between 1961 and 1965. In other words, I look into how people lived, day to day, shaped by the planned economy, but also explore how their family choices influenced the economy around them. Although official documents lack direct clues about this, oral history testimony reveals that the temporary policies in the early 1960s show how daily consumptions and family choices could shape the economy.

Consumerism versus Asceticism

General studies on China's socialist planned economy focus on its theory, system, features, and flaws. This economic system included need-based central plans with state-set resource allocation, production, and consumption. The state economy coupled rigidity and asceticism.⁴ Andrew G. Walder calls the planned economy a “shortage

³ Charityta, “Wuhan fengcheng de di sishiwu tian” [Wuhan lockdown day 54], Weibo, March 18, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220608224546/https://m.weibo.cn/status/4483897402689022>.

⁴ For examples of studies on the system of the China's socialist planned economy, see Dorothy J. Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism: The Politics of Domestic Commerce, 1949–1980*

economy,” which achieved economic growth by “pouring resources into industry rather than developing more efficient ways to use these resources.” The economy was not driven by supply and demand, and resolving this problem without violating the core tenets of socialism proved to be an impossible task.⁵

Over the past decade, scholars have begun to pay attention to commodity and consumerism under socialism and challenge the “pervasive assumption” that the Mao era was “a realm of pure asceticism without room for any consumer desire.”⁶ Karl Gerth asserts that “the persistence of consumerism” permeated the whole Mao era and the leadership held a conflicted attitude towards consumerism—reshaping it in daily life instead of eliminating it.⁷ In his latest book *Unending Capitalism*, Gerth argues that consumerism in the Mao era negated the revolution’s goals.⁸ Deborah Davis critiques that Gerth “ignores the power of the core economic and political institutions created under Mao,” and “ultimately undercuts his original argument about the ability of consumer desires and behaviour to shape societal change.”⁹ Gerth’s proposal that the Cultural Revolution did not uproot consumerism is intriguing. That means that, under even Maoism, the logic of commodity or consumerism continuously suffused everyday life. Although his argument undermines the influential power of the planning system and the Party, Gerth points out that personal behaviours play a role in social change.

What was the state’s role in the continuity of consumerism? Using “the Three Greats” including wristwatches, bicycles, and sewing machines as an example, Karl

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Deborah Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Wenfang Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) ; Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962–1976* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2017).

⁵ Andrew G. Walder, *China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 91.

⁶ Karl Gerth, “Compromising with Consumerism in Socialist China: Transnational Flows and Internal Tensions in ‘Socialist Advertising,’” *Past & Present* 218, no. 8 (2013): 203–4.

⁷ Gerth, “Compromising with Consumerism in Socialist China,” 205.

⁸ Karl Gerth, *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China’s Communist Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 10.

⁹ Deborah Davis, review of *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China’s Communist Revolution*, by Karl Gerth, *The China Journal* 86 (2021): 180.

Gerth reveals the state's effort of shaping consumerism with everyday technologies.¹⁰ Because the Party valued the Three Greats' indispensable contribution as "labor-saving technologies, modes of transportation, and labor multipliers" during the industrialization.¹¹ The Party, instead of choosing to wipe out the consumption of the Three Greats, encouraged people to buy more nationally-produced Three Greats, while repressing imports. The CCP tried to manage consumer desires, which could threaten its control over resource allocation, by promoting "socialist" consumerism, restraining imports of goods from "bourgeois" countries, and advocating "frugality."¹² But simultaneously, the Party encouraged "nationalistic" consumption.¹³ Developing from this idea, I believe that the Party attempted to put individual consuming desire under control, and make use of consumption for the benefit of the Party-state. The CCP did not suppress consumerism persistently and the call for practicing asceticism was only a slogan.

Different from Gerth's emphasis on the influence of consumerism on national finance and the Party's role in continuing consumerism, I attempt to add personal experiences and viewpoints—what ordinary people thought and how they consumed while the Party adjusted its policies towards consumerism—to enrich this discussion. I put money and household consumption at the centre of my study, to explore what shaped family expenses, why individual desires were irrepressible, how citizens consumed, and what citizens thought and cared about in their consumption. I build on previous scholarship to research the impact of individual desires, but also value the national economic system and political contexts, showing how family consumption reacted to the planned economy and influenced the broader society.

¹⁰ The "Three Greats" most often referred to wristwatches, bicycles, and sewing machines before the 1980s. A radio and a camera were also included. In the 1980s, the Three Greats shifted to a combination of TVs, washing machines, and refrigerators. Everyday technology refers to sewing machines, bicycles, typewriters, radios, gramophones, rice mills, and a multitude of others, which can transform day-to-day lives.

¹¹ Gerth, "Compromising with Consumerism in Socialist China," 84.

¹² Gerth, *Unending Capitalism*, 10.

¹³ Gerth, "Compromising with Consumerism in Socialist China," 75–91.

Household Economy and Family History

In line with scholars' attention on consumerism, I put a spotlight on household economy, involving people's household budget and consumption desires, within China's socialist economy in the 1960s. The research builds on studies of the state economic policies on the national level from the top-down perspective, but further puts the spotlight on the analysis of individual economic lives in the private sphere. Barry Naughton touches on the importance of the household economy by mentioning that household budgets were the only exception in the state monopoly banking system, which put capital flows under the control of the state.¹⁴ Household economy, as Richard R. Wilk defines, indicates "how households make decisions, manage their budgets, organize their labour and time, and negotiate power and authority."¹⁵ A family, serving as an institution, requires household members to boost income, manage consumption and expenses, and allocate gender division of labour and power in the household sphere, which the state could not directly intervene in. Historical studies of the household economy find a close parallel in the methods of family history, which highlights a micro group of people, records the details and textures of their experiences over a long period, depicting the ups and downs of society through the lens of personal stories.¹⁶

In the third part of his book *Ancestral Leaves*, Joseph W. Esherick tracks the experiences of Ye family members at mid-twentieth century who received training in

¹⁴ Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 61.

¹⁵ Richard R. Wilk, "Decision Making and Resource Flows Within the Household: Beyond the Black Box," *The Household Economy: Reconsidering the Domestic Mode of Production*, ed. Richard R. Wilk (New York: Routledge, 2019), 23.

¹⁶ For examples, see Joseph Esherick, *Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Jie Li, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). There are two more specific examples. Li Tian and Yunxiang Yan, "Self-Cultivation of the Socialist New Person in Maoist China: Evidence from a Family's Private Letters, 1961–1988," *The China Journal* 82, no. 1 (July 2019): 88–110. Xu Xiuli, "Geming niandai de yinshi ernü: du Zhang Ruirong jiaxin" [Youth in the revolution time: Reading family letters from Zhang Ruirong], *Lishi yuekan*, no. 4 (2017): 49–63.

vocational skills so that they were successfully employed after graduation.¹⁷ The Ye family members were a part of a broader generational group that was exposed to a great deal of radical and revolutionary rhetoric in school, and lived in a system that featured “state ownership of property, Party-state fusion, the politicization of everyday life, and a planned economy.”¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, members of this special group eventually became socialists. They married for love and built up two-income households. With stable jobs and family lives, these socialists were supposed to invest themselves fully in the campaign for national industrialization and be loyal to the Party without any distractions or selfishness. When they encountered household chores and private affairs, however, they exposed their desires and self-orientation. My earlier seminar paper about a young couple named Lu and Jiang who belongs to this group in the 1960s echoes this phenomenon.¹⁹

Personal letters between the couple display the contrast between public and private lives.²⁰ Lu and Jiang graduated from the same college, both worked for the Ministry of Metallurgical Industry in Beijing, had stable salaries, and the husband, Lu, was a Party member. Unlike the ideal mentioned above, the couple were educated and supposed to live an ascetic life, but a lot of space in the letters was dedicated to talking about the family budget. They discussed and even argued about how to allocate their salary to support both themselves and their extended families; they borrowed money from *danwei* (work units), a friend, and colleagues to make up for the shortage of money and *piao* (ration coupons); they scrimped and saved for months to buy unnecessary luxuries;

¹⁷ Joseph Esherick, *Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 6.

¹⁹ Siqi Xu, “How to Survive: A Young Couple’s Strategies in China’s Socialist Planned Economy, 1964–1966,” *History 870: Themes in Asian History: Modern Chinese History Research Seminar* (seminar paper, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, December 16, 2019).

²⁰ The primary sources of this research come from Zhang Letian and Yunxiang Yan, eds., *Personal Letters between Lu Qingsheng and Jiang Zhenyuan, 1961–1986* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2018).

they compared prices in different provinces to purchase cheaper products. Lu and Jiang's letters challenged the stereotype of socialism and asceticism.

My study of the household economy reflects what kind of life that people like Lu and Jiang lived in the 1960s and reveals what was important to urbanites. Family history pays attention to individual stories and the connections of family members. Combining family history's bottom-up study method, I choose a family perspective to study the material and economic society and to interpret socialist lifestyles. I ask what happened when socialism met the Chinese household economy.

This study presents a group portrait that contradicts the planners' expectation. Different families had different incomes, structures, and personal habits, forming different expense patterns. The diversity implied that, as Alexander Day points out, "everyday life stand[s] in for society, where real people, individuals, say and do things that do not clearly follow the dictates of the Party-state."²¹ Individual decisions on spending, saving, raising, and earning money aimed to benefit families and live a better life, rather than obeying the rules or contributing to the state. But the impact of the Party-state could not be negated, when we highlight the tension between the state and the civil society. Day argues that it is an exaggeration that the Party-state, standing outside of the real everyday life, was "a sphere of propaganda, unrealistic policies, faked figures."²² Citizens still lived in the Party-dictated society and were impacted by the CCP's economic policies, consciously or unconsciously. So I prefer to explain that everyday domestic life was a sphere that the Party did not always or consistently affect directly. Citizens kept talking about asceticism and socialism that the Party advocated, but personal consumption strategies did not simply depend on these principles. Their diverse responses to the state-dominated economy coexisted with common household patterns and coping strategies. One main driving factor of consumption was individual or personal interest. Therefore, urban families sometimes would take advantage of illicit economic

²¹ Alexander F. Day, "Breaking with the Family Form: Historical Categories, Social Reproduction, and Everyday Life in Late 1950s Rural China," *positions: asia critique* 29, no. 4 (2021): 870.

²² Day, "Breaking with the Family Form," 870.

activities. The government, for its part, also made use of urbanities' consumption desire, and sometimes tolerated illicit parts of the household economy to facilitate the smooth operation of the planned economic system.

Esherick writes that “the small habits of personal and daily life help shape the larger society in which people live and determine the course of history.”²³ Using his theory in the economic sphere, I argue that urbanities' domestic consuming strategies and the state socialist planned economy were interactional and mutual, but not in a straightforward manner. Individuals who lived in the planned economic system used their household coping strategies to improve their lives, simultaneously helping the economic system function smoothly.

New Generation Employees

Borrowing the idea of J. M. Chris Chang, my analysis, following the vein of recent family studies in the People's Republic of China (PRC), uses “an alternative point of departure for understanding socialism from below.”²⁴ To contribute to the hybrid of the study of everyday life, my project, the main sources of which are living informants and their memories, focuses on voices from family and private lives. Rather than studying household economic lives in sweeping narratives or through one particular case, I interviewed 20 informants who lived in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province in central China between 1961 and 1965. While the history of PRC everyday urban life in Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin has received scholarly attention, I shed light on Wuhan, research about which remains scant. I started interviewing my neighbours and my parents' friends who know me already and are more willing to share their detailed personal stories with me than strangers would be. After understanding my research project, they, as intermediaries, introduced me to their friends and colleagues.

²³ Esherick, *Ancestral Leaves*, xiv.

²⁴ J. M. Chris Chang, “Paper Affairs: Discipline by the Dossier in a Mao-Era Work Unit,” *Administrative* 4, no. 1 (2019): 125.

During my conversations with interviewees, first, I mapped their identities. Wang Shaoguang divides the working class into three parts: activists, “backward elements,” and the “middle-of-the road” workers in his analysis of the participants in the Cultural Revolution. Borrowing his division, I categorize my interviewees as middle elements based on what they told me.²⁵ They said that they participated adequately in political and production activities following instructions from their superiors, but without much enthusiasm. For them, politics meant merely shouting the prevailing slogans along with other workers to avoid punishment or being ostracized, and production was a way to earn one’s living by hard work. They were neither politicians, elites, or leaders in the Party or the work units who enjoyed privileges, nor the desperate people who struggled in unemployment and starvation. They were the new generation of post-1949 young employees in state offices who received education after the founding of the PRC and got government-assigned jobs after graduation. They had politically favoured family backgrounds, such as peasants and workers, and formed conjugal families separate from their extended families. As part of this family focus, I sought to excavate material objects and stories related to money, while asking how national policies and historical events matched up to them.

These oral materials are the most direct and effective way to glimpse into the private sphere of household economic lives. One challenge is asking about the details of daily lives. When I asked my interviewees about where they obtained grain ration coupons and how they used the coupons, they tended to use one sentence to briefly answer the question and swiftly moved to what they wanted to share. Ms. Niu answered, “I went to a grain store to obtain coupons and buy grain,” and then she moved back to share her general impression of the past, “As you know, we lived a miserable life in the past. Comparing to the past, the present life is like living in the paradise.” “Where was the grain store? Could everyone buy grains there?” I would then interrupt and keep asking questions to bring the conversation back into my topic. My interviewees were so willing to share their general feelings and ideas, but usually ignored the details. One

²⁵ Wang Shaoguang, *Failure of Charisma: The Cultural Revolution in Wuhan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35.

reason is that they might have assumed that everyone was familiar with the objective living conditions, such as how to use ration coupons, and what they needed to do was to provide comments. Therefore, as the interviewer, I had to steer the conversation and control the time allocation on each question.

Another challenge, as Gail Hershtatter points out, is that individuals' memory is normally disordered, fading, and intertwined with received or imagined information.²⁶ One solution is to "cross-examine" the testimony through repeating fieldwork. Yunxiang Yan notes that "the same informant who lies in the first interview may reveal his or her actual experience in the third or the seventh interview."²⁷ The other solution is to check oral narratives against "grassroots sources," including blogs and literary works from individuals, to disentangle memories with those inconsistencies and anachronisms.²⁸ Apart from "cross-examining" to clarify the forgotten and misremembered parts, I value these "contaminated" fragments as interpretations of narrators' opinions about the past.²⁹

To juxtapose historical events and personal experiences, the primary sources also require documents and archives representing official perspectives as supporting materials. The official documents rely mainly on archival records in the Wuhan Municipal Archive and the *Wuhan shizhi* [Wuhan gazetteer]. The gazetteer, compiled by government officials with party agendas, reflects multiple realms of Wuhan from 1840 to 1985, explaining the context and development of municipal economic policies, institutional

²⁶ Gail Hershtatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 262–4.

²⁷ The idea of "cross-examine" is borrowed from Jie Li. Li, *Shanghai Homes*, 15; Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11.

²⁸ The initial concept of "grassroots sources" is proposed by Jeremy Brown. See Jeremy Brown, "Finding and Using Grassroots Historical Sources from the Mao Era," *Dissertation Reviews*, published December 15, 2010, <http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/310>.

²⁹ Oral narratives, as Gail Hershtatter points out, "are as contaminated as any other retrievable fragment of the past. It requires cultivating an interest in and respect for that contamination." Hershtatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 24, 263. As Lisa Rofel points out in her ethnography of women workers under Chinese socialism, their stories "evinced the culturally specific means by which people represent and therefore experience the worlds in which they live." Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 14.

frameworks, urban development, people's livelihoods, and so on. Archives, which were created by officials who lived at that time, record implementations of policies and regulations, people's reactions towards policies, as well as personal stories in judicial cases.

Wuhan wanbao [Wuhan evening news], a daily newspaper, is a valuable supplementary source. To convey the Party's thoughts and instructions to ordinary people, the Wuhan Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China established *Wuhan wanbao* in 1961. The municipal committee used this paper to instill political propaganda of frugality into daily stories and influence citizens' household lifestyles in the private sphere.³⁰ The reports in *wanbao* were closely related to ordinary people and could partially reveal their real lifestyles. In one report, some female sewing workers used sewing machines in their factory to help citizens mend torn socks, implying that citizens should exploit worn clothes fully and not get rid of old clothes.³¹ The news corresponded to a proverb saying, "people had to wear clothes new for three years, old for three years, and patched for an extra three years."³² Patches on clothing were common and even became a trend. Ms. Xiong, an accountant in the 1960s, told me that all mothers in her neighbourhood would sew patches on the knee of children's pants to increase cloth's durability. She explained that this was like a mother's wisdom coming from experience, because no one taught them before, but they would spontaneously sew knee patches.³³

Families, Memory, and Society

Everyday life and household economy are implicated in the Party-state and the economic society. Instead of simply replacing the focus on the political economy of the

³⁰ Tu Wenxue and Liu Qingping, eds., *Xin Wuhan shiji* [New Wuhan chronicles] (Wuhan: Wuhan chubanshe, 2010), 222.

³¹ "Powa chongzhi, zhengjiu ruxin" [Reknit and patch old socks], *Wuhan wanbao*, May 7, 1961.

³² Chen Mingyuan, "Bupiao jiyi" [The memory of ration tickets for cloth], *Wenshi bolan* 3 (2008): 27–9.

³³ Ms. Xiong, interview by author, November 1, 2020.

PRC with a bottom-up or empirical view of everyday life, as Alexander Day points out, we should recognize that “everyday life is already a structured terrain.”³⁴ The government regulations, the Party’s propaganda, and the planned economic system interacted, thus forming the Party-dictated material society, where ordinary life and everyday memories emerged. To examine this in Chapter One, I first turn to economic conditions in the urban area in Wuhan in the late 1950s to demonstrate the context, and then move to the 1960s. Through the lens of government regulations, archives, and newspapers, I provide an aerial view of society in which my informants lived between 1961 and 1965.

Different families had different incomes, structures, and personal habits, forming different expense patterns, but their consumption had one main driving factor: individual or personal interests. What real people said and did were undeniably influenced by the propaganda and economic policies, but did not strictly follow the dictates of the Party-state. Chapter Two concentrates on people’s three ways of buying food to illustrate that domestic intention focused on family interests rather than the state development or the fulfillment of the Party’s expectation. People used variable understandings of policies and the guideline of thriftiness to rationalize their own behaviour. Meanwhile, their diverse responses to the broader system coexisted with some common household coping strategies to meet individual consumption desires, especially when the system failed to fulfill personal demand. My informants shared their strategies of depositing cash in their own family bank, gender-divided power of household budget management, and their borrowing money through private associations. Instead of viewing these strategies as resistance or rebellion against the Party-state, I argue, in Chapter Three, that they were self-oriented actions intertwining with and even evolved from the socio-political policies.

These individual coping strategies, whether they furthered or countered the Party’s aspiration, contributed to the development of the Party-state and the smooth function of the planned economic system. Chapter Four excavates what people thought when they participated in illicit trading and the grey economy. The families, though they

³⁴ Day, “Breaking with the Family Form,” 872.

tended not to be troubled by being accused of disobeying the Party's guidelines, valued their desires for commodities and considered purchasing only on account of family needs. The Party also adopted conditional lenient attitudes towards different categories of illicit private actions to benefit the planning system and the state finance. While the planned economic system shaped the household economy, families adopted individual strategies to pursue personal benefits by both obeying or violating regulations, facilitating their own surviving as well as the planned system's continuous functioning.

Chapter 1.

Miserable Years Remembered

“It was a miserable time.”

When I asked my interviewees about their lives between 1959 and 1961 in Wuhan, they repeatedly gave this answer—Wuhan citizens lived an arduous and impoverished life, lacking food and daily necessities. They gave similar narratives to depict their lives in the following years. However, when their general impression encountered their detailed daily stories and governmental documents, their memories about the years from 1961 to 1965 became intertwined with the years before. As the CCP adjusted economic policies and the national finance recovered from the recession between 1959 and 1961, living standards improved. Some Wuhan citizens gradually got rid of starvation and severe poverty, and managed to pursue “lives with higher quality,” such as eating nutritional foods and recreating in leisure time.³⁵ This chapter compares interviewees’ experiences before and after 1961 to illustrate how the economy in Wuhan influenced citizens’ daily lives. I first provide background on the difficult years and recovery methods, then I analyze the prevailing thought of frugality and thriftiness before turning to a discussion about how my informants spent money on groceries and entertainment. Contradicting to details of their improved living standards, my interviewees had a general memory of misery about the lives in the early 1960s. Coupling with the contradiction of memory, my informants used variable interpretations of frugality, which differed from the political bombast and ideological rhetoric, to explain their lifestyles in consumption. The daily lives and the variety of the definitions of thriftiness, nevertheless, were shaped by these miserable years remembered when the society was changed by temporary economic policies.

³⁵ Mr. Zeng, interview by author, October 18, 2020. Mr. Liu, interview by author, November 2, 2020.

The Three Bitter Years

Wuhan is in central China. Three adjacent cities, including Wuchang, Hankou, and Hanyang, which cluster around the intersection of the Han and Yangtze rivers, officially composed the metropolis of Wuhan in 1949 (Figure 2.1).³⁶ In 1954, Wuhan became the capital of Hubei Province. On account of its unrivalled geographical centrality and convenient water and land transport, Wuhan became a major transportation hub and a large commercial and industrial centre. Materials and goods from other provinces were traded here. Wuhan has always been known as “the home of fish and grains” due to its advantageous environmental condition, and residents rarely ran out of supplies. Between 1959 and 1961, however, Wuhan experienced the nationwide economic slump and the shortage of goods.³⁷

In 1960, the grain output of the entire country fell to the lowest amount since 1950. Stocks in state granaries dropped by nearly a half. The number of pigs, the major source of meat, dropped by almost a third to the lowest figure since 1950. The output of oil crops, essential for cooking, and of cotton, the basic material for the nation’s clothing, also had plummeted to the lows since 1950.³⁸ Inflation, accompanying deficit, brought price increasing in Wuhan. The price of pork, for instance, was 1.48 yuan per kilogram in 1957, and it swelled to 1.84 per kilogram in 1961. The pork price increased 24 percent.³⁹ Compared with the consumption power in 1957, per capita cotton consumption in 1961

³⁶ W. South Coblin and Ke Weinan, “Glimpses of Hankou Phonological History,” *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 37, no. 2 (2009): 187–8.

³⁷ Compared with Henan, Heilongjiang, and other provinces, Hubei was not attacked fiercely by the starvation and material shortage. But the average citizens’ living condition was still below the level of 1957. Citizens’ lives were characterized with “indigence,” “hunger,” and “ordeal.” Yang Jisheng compares the data of starvation in different provinces, see Jisheng Yang, *Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai da jihuang jishi* [Gravestone: The great Chinese famine, 1958–1962] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 2008), 538–43.

³⁸ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, vol. 3: The Coming of the Cataclysm* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 14.

³⁹ Wuhan difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Wuhan shizhi: jingji guanli zhi* [Wuhan gazetteer: Management and economics] (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 1999), 204.

dropped 73.7 percent, consumption of meats dived 88.6 percent, and grain consumption declined 24.69 percent.⁴⁰ It was arduous for a citizen to buy even one handkerchief.



Figure 1.1. Map of Wuhan

Source: This is my licensed adaptation of NordNordWest/Wikipedia’s work *Location Map of Hubei, People’s Republic of China*, which can be found at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Hubei_location_map.svg.

Ms. Niu recalled a case of theft when she explained how difficult lives were in the three bitter years. A thief slipped into a kindergarten one night and stole all the quilts inside. Although the case would be considered minor today, it was so severe during the tough time that everyone heard the news, as Ms. Niu narrated, and were astonished because such a pile of quilts was expensive and priceless.⁴¹ Starvation, the laborious acquisition of necessities, and the deteriorated living standards became real, pressing, daily concerns, and resulted in tens of millions of deaths nationwide, mostly in the

⁴⁰ Wuhan difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Wuhan shizhi: jingji guanli zhi*, 18.

⁴¹ Ms. Niu, interview by author, November 14, 2020.

countryside.⁴² Because of the economic downturn, the famine, and the enormous loss of life, the time from 1959 to 1961 has been regarded as the “three bitter years.”⁴³

The Great Leap Forward (GLF) campaign triggered the disaster.⁴⁴ It was an attempt to advance the national economy but only made things worse. Starting in 1958, Communist officials, inspired by utopian visions, endeavored to increase production by putting the entire population to work by massively stepping up construction and production, and shifted domestic work into the public sphere by spurring collectivization and establishing communes. The mass mobilization of the peasantry was an approach to convert surplus labour into capital. The “small-scale, ‘native’-style industrial projects” were the “rational exploitation of dual technologies.”⁴⁵ The hope of the Chinese leaders was to achieve an economic breakthrough that would put China on a path of self-sustaining growth.

The GLF, against the policy-designers’ presumption, magnified the shortcomings of the planned economy. In the early 1950s, China introduced the Stalinist centrally planning system from the Soviet Union. The system organized production according to

⁴² Scholars have different calculations on the number of deaths. Peng Xizhe calculates 23 million deaths in 14 provinces. Ansley Coale concludes that 16.5 million people died, while Basil Ashton infers 30 million deaths and 30 million missing births. Yang Jisheng claims around 36 million people died. Peng Xizhe, “Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China’s Provinces,” *Population and Development Review* 13, no. 4 (1987): 649; Ansley Coale, “Population Trends, Population Policy, and Population Studies in China,” *Population and Development Review* 7, no. 1 (1981): 85–97; Basil Ashton and Kenneth Hill, “Famine in China, 1958–1961,” *Population and Development Review* 10, no. 4 (1984): 613–45; Yang, *Mubei*, 904.

⁴³ MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, 1–7. The specific time of the disaster was different in scholars’ work. MacFarquhar believes that Mao, with the Great Leap Forward, brought the “human catastrophe” between 1958 and 1961. Andrew Walder criticizes the GLF and Mao for causing the famine in 1960–1962. Walder, *China Under Mao*, 178–9.

⁴⁴ MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, 1–7. See also the edited collection of mainland scholarship by Song Yongyi and Ding Shu, *Dayuejin - dajihuang: lishi he bijiao shiye xia de shishi he sibian* [Great Leap Forward-Great Leap Famine: The truth and analysis under historical and comparative perspectives] (Hong Kong: Tianyuan shuwu, 2009); Carl Riskin, “Seven Questions about the Chinese Famine of 1959–1961,” *China Economic Review* 9, no. 2 (1998): 114–7.

⁴⁵ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 2: *The Great Leap Forward* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 4.

“need-based central plans,” rather than based on “profit-driven market price signals.”⁴⁶ The main features of the planned economy were that government owned all large enterprises, assigned production quotas to factories and farms, directly allocated resources, controlled the price system to channel resources into government hands, and implemented a hierarchical personnel system.⁴⁷ The planned system prioritized heavy industry and armaments over consumer industry and agriculture. Planners categorized investments in heavy industry as productive investments as opposed to unproductive investments in consumer goods.⁴⁸ The intense pursuit of rapid heavy industrial development created the neglect and shortage of various consumer goods. The expansionary policies of the GLF also led to an increase in the amount of currency in circulation, causing inflation. The prices of goods rose and consumption standards dropped.⁴⁹ To handle the dilemma, the Party in 1961 adopted emergency temporary adjustment methods. In the next section, I analyze personal memories alongside the Party’s adjustment policies to explore the years of recovery.

The Years of Recovery, 1961–1965

When I asked my interviewees about life between 1961 and 1965, they also used “miserable” to describe it, but added the word “satisfying.” Ms. Niu said, “It was really hard to buy enough food to eat. Everyone was skinny due to the hunger. But we felt happy. Because people at that time were austere and less demanding, it was easy to feel satisfied.”⁵⁰ She partially explained why they felt satisfied from an individual perspective, but neglected to mention that the living standard and the supply of daily necessities had been gradually rehabilitated through the CCP’s emergency measures. Confronting the recession, the Central Committee reassessed economic plans and quotas

⁴⁶ Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China*, 10.

⁴⁷ Naughton, *The Chinese Economy*, 59. China’s tightly-managed financial plan was phased in between 1949 and 1956, and lasted more than two decades.

⁴⁸ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 94. Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China*, 10; Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism*, 16–7.

⁴⁹ MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, 14.

⁵⁰ Ms. Niu, interview by author, July 25, 2021.

and took decisive actions to restore the sanity and stability of the economy after the GLF disaster. At the 9th plenum in 1962, the Party decided to curtail the scale of industrial production, “readjust the tempo of development,” and follow the policy of “readjusting, consolidating, filling out, and raising standards.”⁵¹ The central leadership then drafted “lengthy statements of principle and prescription.”⁵²

The adjustments, not aiming to reverse the mainstream of the socialist planned economy of the 1950s, still upheld the elaborate planned system of implementing socialism and “equitable allocation.” During the 1950s, the party-state gradually took over all productive assets and financial sectors through reforms in commerce and industry, leaving no significant private enterprise or private finance. Production, resource allocations, commodity distributions, plus price designations and ration coupon assignments were all under the control of the Party.⁵³ The hierarchical personal income system set basic wage rates for different levels of employees and essentially determined each family’s income. The system, along with fixed commodity prices, further helped the state manipulate consumption and money transactions on the individual level. In the stage of recovering from the catastrophe of the GLF, the CCP carried out temporary measures, which were seemingly opposite to the principles of socialism, to boost national finances and improve urban living standards. But the measures were temporary and still functioned in the planned economic system with the same aim of strengthening the control over individuals and markets.

Three Recovery Measures

Andrew Walder summarizes three ways to deal with pervasive consumer shortages in a socialist economy: “administrative rationing,” “rationing by queue,” and

⁵¹ Liu Suinian, *China’s Socialist Economy: An Outline History (1949–1984)* (Beijing: Beijing Review, 1986), 272–3, 279.

⁵² MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, vol. 3*, 74. The statements included the Forty Articles on Commerce, the Seventy Articles on Industry, the Thirty-five Articles on Handicrafts, the Fourteen Articles on Sciences, the Sixty Articles on Higher Education, and so on.

⁵³ Deborah Davis, “Introduction: A Revolution in Consumption,” in *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, ed. Deborah Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 3; Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism*, 20.

“rationing by prices.”⁵⁴ Among these methods, “administrative rationing” was predominant. The government issued coupons to individuals that permitted them to purchase a rationed item. In 1962, the Wuhan municipal government issued industrial coupons (*gouhuoquan*) to control individual consumption of industrial commodities, including but not limited to toothpastes, enamel cups, and vacuum flasks.⁵⁵ The assignment of industrial coupons was according to wage, instead of based on family size. Citizens who had more wages would be assigned more industrial coupons. The intention was to control the allocation of commodities. But the measure liberated consumerism because citizens had more choices to buy what they wanted. When officials investigated the implementation, residents reported their support of the policy because the stores shelved more industrial commodities and they could buy things without waiting.⁵⁶ A store seller recalled that after the enforcement of industrial ration coupons, she no longer heard complaints from customers that others bought rare things thanks to backdoor dealings.⁵⁷ With more and more commodities shelved in stores, people had more choices than before and personal consumption desires grew. With the economy and daily lives recovering from 1963, some industrial commodities gradually could be purchased without using coupons.⁵⁸

The second approach was “rationing by prices.” Walder deems that through increasing prices of scarce goods to higher levels, few people could afford them, because

⁵⁴ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 94–5.

⁵⁵ Industrial commodities were referred to those industrial productions for daily use, such as toothpastes, batteries, matches, clothing, and galoshes. The containing categories of commodities kept changing according to the supply and plans. At the beginning of the implement of this policy, the Wuhan government applied the industrial ration coupons to 76 kinds of commodities. In 1963, the number of commodities shrank to 34. Wuhan shi diyi shangye ju, *Guanyu gouhuoquan gongying qingkuang he yijian* [Conditions of the supply of industrial ration coupons and suggestions], June 15, 1963, Wuhan Municipal Archive (WMA), xx000078-ws01-0654-0003.

⁵⁶ Wuhan shi diyi shangye ju, *Gouhuoquan qingkuang jianbao diqi qi* [The seventh brief report of industrial ration coupons], February 16, 1962, WMA, xx000078-ws02-0870-0007.

⁵⁷ Wuhan shi diyi shangye ju, *Gouhuoquan qingkuang jianbao diwu qi* [The fifth brief report of industrial coupons], February 3, 1962, WMA, xx000078-ws02-0870-0005.

⁵⁸ Wuhan shi diyi shangye ju, *Guanyu zai dazhong chengshi jixu shixing ping gouhuoquan gongying bufen shangpin de yijian* [Suggestions about continuing the policy of industrial coupons in big cities], June 28, 1964, WMA, xx000078-ws01-0720-0020.

the hierarchical personal wage system restricted ordinary citizens' incomes, thus suppressing demand. The CCP carried out a policy to sell a few high-priced luxuries, however, with the intention of gathering money from people, improving urban living standards, and lowering the prices of commodities in free and black markets.⁵⁹ These luxuries in limited categories usually had higher prices than those that required ration coupons, but were cheaper than those sold in black markets. Selling the high-priced luxuries freely without ration coupons could suppress transactions and trades in the black market and accumulate capital for the state, while it unexpectedly encouraged people to consume and privileged the rich.

The third method, “rationing by queue,” referred to people standing in line to make a purchase, praying that items were still in stock when their turn came up. Walder writes that this was time-consuming and required customers to exercise vigilance to find items in retail outlets. In Wuhan, ordinary people, however, had viewed waiting and purchasing in queues as normal. The government temporarily reopened free markets and revived peddlers, trying to eliminate queues and energize goods exchange and individual consumption. Chapter Two and Chapter Four respectively will delve into the implementations and impacts of high-priced luxuries and free markets in Wuhan.

Illusion and Validity in Memory

Starting from 1963, the categories of commodities and foods in stores constantly increased. Ordinary citizens gradually were able to avoid hunger. According to data from the State Statistics Bureau, the national agriculture production in 1965 was equal to 1957, representing the state's recovery from the three bitter years.⁶⁰ The three main measures (including issuing industrial coupons, selling high-priced luxuries, and reopening free markets), accompanying the recovery of the economy in urban area, were progressively

⁵⁹ Chen Yun, “Muqian caizheng jingji de qingkuang he kefu kunnan de ruogan banfa” [The current financial and economic situations and several measures to overcome the difficulties], in *Chen Yun wenxuan, 1956–1985* [Selected works of Chen Yun, 1956–1985] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1986), February 26, 1962, <http://www.71.cn/2012/0522/671655.shtml>.

⁶⁰ Guojia tongji ju, *Zhongguo tongji nianjian, 1983* [China statistical yearbook in 1983] (Beijing: Guojia tongji ju, 1983), 103, 393.

abolished by the government. Mr. Liu recalled that beginning from 1963, his family could have meat and eggs, and his children even had milk to drink, which he had never expected during the three bitter years. He said his family even saved a little money each month to offer meals to friends and relatives when they visited.⁶¹ Urbanities survived the three bitter years and gradually returned to the living standard that they had before the GLF.

In the interviews, however, all my informants, except Mr. Liu who gave a detailed narrative of a transition in 1963, had a general impression of poverty and starvation between 1961 and 1965. Though they mentioned their lifestyles including entertainment in leisure times, which I thought would be difficult to achieve for a person who struggled to survive, they still defined these years as miserable. One reason for the definition was that, compared with the lives they have today, the past was definitely tied to poverty and a lack of daily necessities. Another reason was that, as Gail Hershatter indicates, “[w]hat fades in memory is not the Great Leap or the famine, but the heft and length of the years that follow.”⁶² When I asked about the industrial ration coupons, the high-priced luxuries, and the free markets, most of my interviewees, including Mr. Liu, did not have an impression about these short-term policies, because they subconsciously thought that the measures were irrelevant to their lives. Mr. Liu remembered specific details about his life in 1963 because his daughter was born in that year and he had to purchase daily goods to take care of his pregnant wife. My informants may combine the three bitter years with the following six years, and the suffering in the earlier three years were so impressive and far-reaching that they naturally overlooked the subsequent ordinary days. In the following section, I put my informants’ memory under the spotlight. I use the principle of “thrift and frugality” as an example to illustrate how people interpreted and reshaped the Party’s idea to accommodate to their own lifestyles. The reshaping itself also implied the improvement of people’s lives while the national economy recovered.

⁶¹ Mr. Liu, interview by author, November 2, 2020.

⁶² Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 264.

Frugal Lives

Along with memorable misery, the common word that my interviewees used was *jianku pusu*, which means thrift and frugality. Thrift and frugality stood for good management of money and property, avoiding unnecessary expenditures and waste, and being a productive and useful person. The idea was considered by individuals as the heritage of Chinese traditional virtue, “revering frugality and eliminating luxury.”⁶³ But this was also related to the Party’s propaganda to cope with the scarce resources and materials both for industries and daily use.

Frugality in Propaganda

In November 1960, the Wuhan Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) held a “Five Goods” contest to select outstanding individuals from five aspects, including believing in socialism, working diligently, living frugally, educating children, as well as uniting neighbours and paying attention to personal hygiene. If individuals were good at these five aspects, they would be granted the title “*xianjin geren*,” which literally means a paragon. Among these five aspects, thrift was highlighted particularly with a specific explanation:

First, an outstanding individual should make a strict budget and cherish every cent in your pocket. You should purchase nothing except necessities. Even though you are rich, you should live like you were in poverty.

Second, an advanced individual is capable of saving more grain, cooking oil, cotton cloth, coal, water, electricity, and money than others in his or her unit. You are supposed to actively deposit money in the bank and encourage your colleagues and neighbours to be patriotic by doing the same.⁶⁴

The CYLC was organized for youth by the CCP. The contest underlined the Party’s intention—urging Wuhan citizens to do two things: being frugal and saving as much as

⁶³ Margherita Zanasi, *Economic Thought in Modern China: Market and Consumption, c. 1500–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 41.

⁶⁴ Wuhan gongchan zhuyi qingnian tuan Wuhan shi weiyuan hui, *Guanyu pingxuan biaoyang qinjian jieyue aiguo chuxu xianjin jiti ji geren de tongzhi* [Announcement of selecting outstanding collectives and individuals in diligence, thrift, patriotism, and deposit], November 28, 1960, WMA, xx000092-ws01-0361-0012.

possible, and depositing these savings in the bank. In the following years, the government kept organizing activities to promote and educate people to live a thrifty life. During the celebration of Women's Day in 1962, the Wuhan government even highlighted the obligation of women to manage their families according to the "Five Goods."⁶⁵

How to use the limited resources became a propaganda priority during the early 1960s. The CCP connected the "Five Goods" virtues with patriotism. The Party linked the concept of a thrifty lifestyle to contributing to the state, by saying that every single thing that you saved spared more resources for the state to develop national industry and agriculture. The Party attempted to convince individuals that they also benefited from living a frugal life, because following a strict budget helped save money and prepare for the future.⁶⁶

Wuhan wanbao, which was established by the CCP, helped convey the principle of thrift to ordinary people through reporting local news and everyday lives. On the second page of *wanbao* on May 18, 1961, a report provided three tips for citizens to save soap. First, before using soap, citizens could immerse clothes into clean water to get rid of dirt. Second, hard water contained certain chemicals that reduced the effectiveness of soap. Citizens could soften the water before washing clothes. Third, lathering too much was a waste of soap.⁶⁷

The newspaper contained more than laundry tips. One main section was to report outstanding figures' deeds of living a thrifty life. A series of reports, "Do as Yu Hongqi does," tells the story of Mr. Yu, who was a pedicab driver. Mr. Yu refused to overcharge passengers. But he managed to save money for his family by designing a strict budget

⁶⁵ Wuhan shi funü lianhe hui, *Sanba funijie haozhao* [Call on Women's Day], March 8, 1962, WMA, xx000093-ws01-0142-0003. This is not the first time that the Party called for thriftiness. But the definition was varying while policies changed.

⁶⁶ "Fayang qinlao jiejian de meide," [Developing the virtue of diligence and thrift], *Wuhan wanbao*, January 7, 1962. This is a comment published on the first page of the newspaper. It does not have an author's name on it. Since the CCP managed the newspaper, I believe this comment represents the attitude of the Party and the government towards urging citizens to live a thrifty life.

⁶⁷ "Zenyang jiesheng feizao" [How to save soap], *Wuhan wanbao*, May 18, 1961.

and living frugally. Following the story were some responses from people who learned from Mr. Yu, a paragon, and improved their lives. The series lasted more than one month. Multiple responses were published by the newspaper. Although they contained diverse details, the responses had a same pattern. First, learners reflected on their flaws by comparing themselves to Mr. Yu. Second, they presented their own achievements by living a thrifty life as Mr. Yu did.⁶⁸

Fostering a frugal lifestyle could be superficially understood as advocacy of pure asceticism, referring to self-denial and restraint of one's own desires and interests, especially about consumerism. But the Party's attitude towards consumerism was complicated and varied. Karl Gerth explains the phenomenon as the CCP's intention to restrain consumer desires that might threaten its control over resource allocation and promote "socialist" and nationalistic consumerism.⁶⁹ Between 1961 and 1965, developing consumerism for the Party was a temporary method to accommodate the fragile socio-economical realities of the country. The measures aimed to accumulate capital for the state by collecting money from people who had a large sum of spare money saved at home. The inner logic was the Party's intention to intervene in the private sphere. In other words, the state aimed to "politicize everything, to bring everything into the public realm where it can be seen and controlled."⁷⁰ But individual or household consumption behaviour could not be strictly controlled by outside policies, while households survived as "small spaces of accustomed ease and joy, beauty and indulgence, hope and faith, wit, menace, risk, or reserve."⁷¹ Even though the Party had an expectation of thriftiness, the practical situations demonstrated the variation of individual understandings of thriftiness and dramatically different lifestyles.

⁶⁸ "Zhao Yu Hongqi nayang ban" [Do as Yu Hongqi does], *Wuhan wanbao*, October 8, 1961; "Zhao Yu Hongqi nayang ban" [Do as Yu Hongqi does], *Wuhan wanbao*, November 15, 1961.

⁶⁹ Karl Gerth, "Consumerism in Contemporary China," in *Faith, Finance, and Economy*, ed. Tanweer Akram and Salim Rashid (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2020), 75–91.

⁷⁰ Jake Werner, "To Confront the Totality: A Critique of Empiricism in the Historiography of the People's Republic of China," *positions: asia critique* 29, no. 4 (2021): 723–4.

⁷¹ Vivienne Shue, "Epilogue: Mao's China—Putting Politics in Perspective," in *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 370.

Varieties of Thrift: Different Household Consumption Styles

My informants, although they claimed to believe in the doctrine of asceticism, chose to cut down household expenses in accordance with their incomes and personal preferences rather than trying to meet outside political requirements. Household consumption styles varied when families were in different economic conditions.

Mr. Liu, a professor holding a graduate degree, and his wife, a principal of a primary school, earned 112 yuan per month. In 1963, his daughter was born. He managed to buy fish and chickens from farmers each week to cook a nutritious meal for his wife. He fed his baby with eggs and milk every day. The couple did not spend money on their parents and siblings. Earnings of 112 *yuan* per month meant that they had no financial pressure and even could save money. “Because we had enough money, I wanted to give the best to my family. I used my connections to buy nutritious food and then I barely had money left each month.”⁷² He even asked friends who traveled to Shanghai for business to bring him imported milk powder and health supplements, because there was no supply in Wuhan.

Compared to Liu’s family, Ms. Xiong, an accountant I mentioned above, lived a totally different life. She married a professor in the 1950s; together they earned 90 *yuan* every month. After sending money to their impoverished parents and siblings, they had no more than 30 *yuan*. When I asked her what she fed her daughter who was born in 1965, she answered emotionally, “Diluted rice paste was enough for my daughter. I had to be a penny-pincher. We never thought of eating eggs or drinking milk, let alone nourishments. That was pie in the sky.”⁷³

Liu’s family and Xiong’s family had strikingly different household budgets and consumption behaviours. For Ms. Xiong, eggs and milk were luxuries, while Mr. Liu considered those foods as necessities. Frugality meant different things for them. What they had in common was the idea of keeping expenditures within the limits of income

⁷² Mr. Liu, interview by author, November 2, 2020.

⁷³ Ms. Xiong, interview by author, November 1, 2020.

and living a thrifty life. In other words, their understanding of “frugality” referred to not buying unnecessary things and not wasting things, so they were willing to buy anything as long they could afford and benefit from it. This was not consistent with the Party’s aspiration.

Developing the idea of living within one’s means, ordinary people not only spent money on basic necessities of life, but also paid for entertainment. Ms. Niu, who was in middle school in 1961, told me that she went to the post office every Friday to buy stamps because she was addicted to collecting them. The employees there were all familiar with her. When the new stamps arrived in the post office, they would inform her. The 1960s impressed Ms. Niu as a tough time. She had to walk 10 kilometers every day to go to school in order to save two cents, the fee of taking a bus.⁷⁴ The price of a collection of stamps was 0.5 yuan, higher than the fee of taking a bus. Her choice illustrated that the expense of taking a bus was unnecessary, while the cost of stamps did not violate her principle of saving money, because spending money on stamps could boost her spirits through the difficult time. She asserted that hobbies deserved investment as long as you could afford them. A family was also willing to spend money on watching a film or an opera. For Mr. Bu watching movies was the way that he dated his wife. He insisted on going together with Mrs. Bu twice a month. The Party, rather than suppressing urbanities’ consuming desires in entertainment, encouraged the development of the cultural industry like film and opera.⁷⁵ *Wuhan wanbao* also reported daily movie screening schedules and advertised new movies and performances in theatres.⁷⁶ Though the promotion of literature and arts had a political purpose, it created conditions, even fueling people’s demands, to consume. From the perspective of ordinary people, expenditures for recreation were not the routine, they served as infrequent rewards for daily hard work and a release from pressures of their thrifty lives, which was a special category of necessities that were essential for mental health. Their varying understanding

⁷⁴ Ms. Niu, interview by author, November 14, 2020.

⁷⁵ Wuhan difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Wuhan shizhi: wenhua zhi* [Wuhan gazetteer: Culture] (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 1998), 356.

⁷⁶ “Jinwan dianying, mingtian dianying” [Movies for tonight and tomorrow], *Wuhan wanbao*, June 12, 1961. “Xin pian zhanlan” [Exhibition of new films], *Wuhan wanbao*, June 30, 1961.

of necessities and thrift also revealed that their lives were improving and were not as poor and indigent as in their narratives and memories. If they were in overwhelming poverty, they would have never considered paying for recreation.

Conclusion

A miserable life during the three bitter years was memorable for individuals. My informants dwelled on their feelings and suffering, overshadowing the following plain days and overlooking the restoring of their living standards. Deficient production and the impaired economy were progressively renovated by the Party's measures. The recovering economy improved Wuhan citizens' daily lives. But the recovery of living standards faded in people's memory, only the overwhelming impression of misery left. The Party's temporary adjustment measures effectively rescued national finances as well as ordinary people's lives, but its intention of advocating frugality and controlling individual consumption was not as successful as renovating the economy. Individuals used their personal definitions of thriftiness, which differed from the state's aspiration and the ideological rhetoric in propaganda, to rationalize their material desires. But my informants' consumption and their varied understandings of thriftiness demonstrated the improvement of living standards and the effectiveness of the state's temporary economic measures and political guidelines. The next chapter, using food as an example, explores how my informants applied their understandings of thriftiness to consumption and how the policies tangled with individual choices, ultimately leading to the self-oriented household economic strategies.

Chapter 2.

Where to Eat

Food is a paramount and indispensable component of daily life. Everyday diet choices are driven by family budget perception, time, and the convenience of meal preparation and consumption processes.⁷⁷ Because of the general miserable impression about the years between 1961 and 1965, I assumed that Wuhan citizens experienced a totally reversed situation—the supply chain issues caused the shortage of food and no choices on food. However, my informants offered me a different story: although they claimed to lack food, they still had options for where to buy food and eat, with diverse personal consuming preferences embedded in their choices. The three main options were buying raw food and cooking at home, buying meals in a dining hall, and eating in a restaurant.

The Party, as I mention in Chapter One, educated citizens to behave frugally and attempted to control consumerism under the socialist planned economy. Nevertheless, the consuming logic of the new generation of employees in Wuhan did not strictly obey the doctrine of frugality. Di Wang argues that Chengdu residents' everyday habits were “relatively voluntary and free” and “not manipulated by the needs of the state and its ruling party.”⁷⁸ Ordinary families instead valued the limited funds, the convenience of buying items, and personal preferences. This chapter discusses the three consuming options of food that the new generation of employees had, showing that the Party and the policies' influence on ordinary household consumption was limited. In other words, the household economy, despite being affected by the broader socio-political systems, was uncontrolled and self-oriented. People chose different ways to buy food, whether the government urged them to or not, while using their own definition of thrift, which was not aligned with the propaganda version.

⁷⁷ Peter Jackson and Valerie Viehoff, “Reframing Convenience Food,” *Appetite* 98 (2016): 2–6.

⁷⁸ Di Wang, *The Teahouse under Socialism: The Decline and Renewal of Public Life in Chengdu, 1950–2000* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 19.

Cooking at Home

The first choice for Wuhan citizens was to buy food and cook at home. When purchasing groceries, citizens needed to consider both the prices and ration coupons. There were four main categories of coupons: ration coupons for staple grains and cooking oil, coupons for non-staple foods, coupons for clothing and shoes, and coal ration coupons.⁷⁹ The ration coupons gave individuals permission to purchase a certain amount of things in the national system of “unified purchase and sale.” Coupled with the fixed-price compulsory procurement by the state and state monopoly marketing, ration coupons served as a tool for central and local governments to hierarchically control goods distribution and individual daily consumption.⁸⁰

Among these, the grain ration coupon was most important. It was called the “second currency” by citizens. Citizens divided food into two main parts: staple food, including rice, flour, and their byproducts (like noodle, flour, and steamed bun); and non-staple food, including vegetable, meat, and egg, any food other than grains. During times of food shortage, citizens would first worry about staple food, because they supplied a large fraction of energy needs, while non-staple food, serving as a nutritious supplement, was in the second rank. The design of grain coupons was, as Andrew Walder explains, “as elaborate as the regular national currency.”⁸¹ In November 1953, the central government decided to carry out a step-by-step state monopoly over the purchase and supply of grain throughout the country, aiming to ensure enough grain for domestic demand, stabilize grain prices, and eliminate speculation.⁸² The Wuhan government, following the guidance of the central authorities, issued a detailed regulation of rationing

⁷⁹ The third category contains cotton-made things (like quilts and pillows), clothing, garments, and shoes.

⁸⁰ Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism*, 23.

⁸¹ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 96.

⁸² Zhengwuyuan, “Zhenhwuyuan: guanyu shixing liangshi de jihua shougou he jihua gongying de mingling” [Government administration council: The instruction of implementing planned purchase and planned supply of grain], November 23, 1953, *The Maoist Legacy*, <https://www.maoistlegacy.de/db/items/show/5396>.

grains in 1955.⁸³ The authorities allocated grain ration coupons to individuals every month. The allocation quantity varied in the following years but the basic amount was around 30 catties.⁸⁴

Citizens commonly had two steps to obtain their monthly grain ration coupons before purchasing any staple food. First, they had to register their family address with a Residents' Committee to obtain their *hukou* (household registration), and a grain ration booklet, which was a long-term voucher for the entire household to obtain their grain monthly.⁸⁵ The Residents' Committees served as a tool to collect statistics, including household registrations, for the central government to decide the allocation of ration coupons to urban residents.⁸⁶ The second step, as Ms. Niu recalled, was to go to the assigned grain stores to get grain ration coupons.⁸⁷ Each grain store was responsible for grain supply and coupon distribution in the neighbourhood. Citizens in the area could only get grain ration coupons and buy raw staple food for the whole family in this store. When citizens purchased in the grain store, staff would not charge ration coupons, instead they directly recorded the purchasing details on the citizens' booklets. But when citizens wanted to buy grain-made food in other places, like dessert stores, dining halls, and restaurants, they needed to pay money and grain ration coupons at the same time.

⁸³ Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism*, 20, 34–8.

⁸⁴ The regulation divided city dwellers into 9 categories with 14 levels and stipulated the amount of assigned grain to each person per month. Those who worked as extra heavy manual laborers would obtain coupons for 25 kilograms of grain. A three-year-old kid would get 3.5 kilograms of grain. In the following years, the allocated quantity varied according to the changes of grain production in Hubei, but the basic amount for ordinary employees was around 30 catties per month.

⁸⁵ The urban areas in each city were divided into districts. The districts, in turn, were composed of subdistricts operated by Street Committees that contained several neighborhoods, which were run by Residents' Committees. Staff in committees transmitted government messages, “carried out sanitation campaigns, helped to administer grain and other rations, and mediated disputes between households or within families, including marriage counseling.” Walder, *China Under Mao*, 78–9.

⁸⁶ The household registration in urban areas effectively settled down people at the same place. The system was a cornerstone of organizing populations in urban neighborhoods. David Bray, *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 115; Walder, *China Under Mao*, 77–8.

⁸⁷ Ms. Liu, interview by author, July 25, 2021.

Ms. Zhao shared her saving strategy in the grain store: she could use coupons for rice to buy more coarse grain. The assigned grain ration coupons did not guarantee that citizens could use all of them to buy rice or wheat flour. A large proportion of grain coupons were set to only buy coarse grain, such as white sweet potatoes and corn flour. Only a tiny proportion of grain coupons could be used to buy rice and wheat flour.⁸⁸ The price of five catties of rice was higher than five catties of corn flour, because corn flour had less value and quality than rice. Ms. Zhao, using rice coupons in exchange for more coupons of corn flour, could sacrifice the quality in exchange for a larger quantity of staple food by spending the same amount of money.⁸⁹ I asked other informants about this strategy. Most of them denied doing such illegal grain coupon trading, but admitted the possibility of using this strategy to economize. Rather than doubting Ms. Zhao, I believe that other informants' denials were due to the illegality of this strategy. The last step for citizens, after buying what they wanted, was to go back home and cook.

The disadvantages of cooking at home included three aspects: the convenience of purchasing food, time, and the cooking condition. The new generation employees, who were busy with their own jobs, would prefer the ready-to-eat food, which referred to buying dishes in dining halls. The next section dives into three reasons young conjugal families chose dining halls.

Buying Food in Dining Halls

Mr. Bu, a professor in a college, specified the three reasons for getting his food at the dining hall: the first was related to the features of work unit and housing conditions; the second reason was due to the food shortage; and the third was his personal preference.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Chen Xiangyang, "Xiaoshi de xin Beijing" [New Beijing is disappeared], *Huaxia wenzhai*, no. 1066 (2011), <http://my.cnd.org/modules/wfsection/article.php?articleid=29845>.

⁸⁹ Ms. Zhao, interview by author, March 8, 2021.

⁹⁰ Mr. Bu, interview by author, December 27, 2020.

His housing was the main reason. Compared to senior employees who lived in private houses, the new generation of employees had different and even worse living and cooking conditions. They had just graduated, got a job in a work unit, and started living apart from their parents. What they could normally live in was a collective dormitory assigned by their work unit. Each family had their own apartment but they would live with their colleagues in the same building or the same neighbourhood, forming integrated communities with employees living together.⁹¹ Before analyzing the housing conditions, we should understand the life in a work unit as the background.

The archetype of the work unit was a walled community equipped with production facilities and other infrastructure for the convenience and benefit of residents. The state earmarked funding to construct dining halls, childcare centres, schools, medical clinics, barber shops, and recreation facilities.⁹² Accompanying the facilities, the state had a series of policies to provide benefits for members in work units.⁹³ The work unit served not only as an institution of distributing welfare and social services, but as a vehicle for social and political control over individuals.⁹⁴ Work units organized political study groups and activities during and after working hours to impart the CCP's ideology and policies.⁹⁵ Ms. Xiong, working as an accountant, assisted road building in the weekend. She said, "This was so-called voluntary work," she said, "even though it was exhausting, no one could refuse to be a volunteer, because it was organized by the work

⁹¹ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 92–3.

⁹² For example, in 1962, the State Council issued regulations on the expenditure of employee welfare subsidies, emphasizing the funding should be used on subsidizing employees in need and establishing welfare facilities. Wuhan shi zong gonghui, *Zhigong jingji shenghuo diaocha* [Survey of employees' economic living standard], September 26, 1962, WMA, xx000091-ws01-0234-0005; Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 1; Walder, *China Under Mao*, 93.

⁹³ Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 54; Whyte, "Urban Life in the People's Republic," 695. Work units had the responsibility to allocate social insurance, including pensions, disability benefits, and medical insurance. When workers retired, they continued to receive pensions and healthcare through the enterprise, and they participated in work unit organizations and activities for retirees. Factory health clinics provided basic medical care and sent members with more complicated problems to municipal or county hospitals, with the work unit picking up the tab.

⁹⁴ Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 54.

⁹⁵ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 79–80.

unit.”⁹⁶ The party cadres attempted to oversee every fragment of urban lives even outside work. They also organized highly supervised recreational activities in leisure time and provided facilities, such as auditoriums to stage concerts or show films, sports fields, and libraries.⁹⁷ The unified labor recruitment and allocation (*tongzhao tongpei*) system replaced labour markets, and individuals were assigned to a work unit once they graduated. Employees thereafter had permanent tenure and little opportunity of departure, thus staying in the same work unit for their entire adult lives.⁹⁸ That means that the work unit got involved in almost every aspect of individual lives and tried to ensure that urban lives revolved only around the Party.⁹⁹ Walder calls the relationship between urban workers and work units “organized dependency.”¹⁰⁰

Almost every living activity was with colleagues in the work unit. Connections between colleagues grew tighter and tighter. Citizens gradually got used to putting an eye on each other and had little personal private space, thus putting everyone under surveillance. The provision of government-subsidized housing in the work unit, even though it was also welfare, contributed to the reduction of individual private space. The housing was overcrowded and substandard. Apartments had only one room of about 10 square meters, with no private kitchen or bathroom, and rarely had running water with a sink.¹⁰¹ Ms. Li lived with her family in a one-room apartment, with only enough space for

⁹⁶ Ms. Xiong, interview by author, November 1, 2020.

⁹⁷ Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 54, 63; Walder, *China Under Mao*, 93; Whyte, “Urban Life in the People’s Republic,” 698.

⁹⁸ Barry Naughton also highlights the durability of employment, describing workers as citizens of the work unit. Naughton, *The Chinese Economy*, 62. See also Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 1, 57.

⁹⁹ The work unit system, including factories, government agencies, schools, hospitals, all other economic enterprises and urban workplaces, covered most urban residents. Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 54.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 13. With the system established, the CCP managed to transform cities into “organized, production-oriented, and economically secure places with low levels of unemployment, crime, corruption, and other urban maladies.” Martin King Whyte, “Urban Life in the People’s Republic,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 15:684.

¹⁰¹ Walder, *China Under Mao*, 96.

a bed and a cabinet.¹⁰² She complained about the bathroom, which located outside the building. Before she could use the bathroom, she had to step out of the building, head to the public toilet, and wait in line, especially in the morning before work and at night before bedtime. She cooked in the hall and shared the facilities with her neighbours. Mr. Bu also had to use a coal stove and cook in the public corridor, putting all his actions on display, because all his neighbours would know what he was cooking. He thought that cooking in the public corridor might bother his neighbours passing by and he did not like the feeling of being monitored. Therefore, his family rarely cooked unless they were desperate for other foods to temporarily substitute tastes and supplement nutrition.

The other reason was the difficulty of purchasing enough raw materials to cook. While the whole country was in food shortage, grocery stores were almost always empty. Even in the dining hall, the three normal meals were steamed rice, radish stew, and boiled celery cabbage. It was hard for a government-sponsored canteen, let alone individuals, to buy plentiful and varied food. Mr. Bu said, “I remembered clearly that in the winter of 1962, I volunteered to cart a pile of radishes to the dining hall from tens of kilometers away.”¹⁰³ He heard that special connections allowed the staff in the dining hall to purchase so many radishes at one time. The third reason was that eating in a dining hall saved both money and time. Because of the special financial support from the government, the dining hall offered cooked food at lower prices than those in restaurants. Cooking at home, in this case, sometimes cost more than buying food directly in the dining hall in the 1960s. Mr. Bu believed that he could devote more time to taking care of his family if he brought food back home from the dining hall, which saved the time of purchasing, prepping, and cooking food.

Mr. Bu’s explanation of family choice of eating in a dining hall was based on his personal preference, the unfavourable social circumstances, and the convenience of the dining hall. None of his sentences mentioned that his choice was driven by the Party’s advocacy of frugality. But it is hard to measure how the propaganda of asceticism

¹⁰² Ms. Li, interview by author, Oct. 22, 2020.

¹⁰³ Mr. Bu, interview by author, December 27, 2020.

worked, because he took saving money into consideration, which echoed the requirements of living sparingly. The third option, which was dining out, tells a different story: once citizens had adequate funds, they acted differently, weakening the ideas of thriftiness.

Dining Out

Mr. Bu and Mrs. Bu together earned 106 *yuan* per month. Excluding the payments of necessities like water bill, electricity bill, and fees for eating in the dining hall, they had around 20 *yuan* of spare money for leisure and entertainment. They went to a famous restaurant called Guan Sheng Yuan to buy a bowl of rib soup every weekend. There was no meat in the soup and it cost four *jiao*.¹⁰⁴ Mr. Bu regarded this bowl of soup as a reward for a week of hard work and he believed that eating something good occasionally was beneficial to both mental and physical health.¹⁰⁵ Mr. Zeng shared this viewpoint and he sometimes brought his family to eat barbecue, though he only bought two skewers of roast meat at one time. He thought most of the citizens also had the same idea, because the restaurant did not offer barbecue all the time, but once it supplied the barbecue, people would line up till it sold out.¹⁰⁶

Following the logic of frugality in the Party's propaganda, I assumed people should refrain from purchasing anything unnecessary. In other words, consuming in a restaurant contradicted what the Party called for. Ironically, restaurants, which were all controlled and managed by the government, were never closed, and in 1961, the government approved opening a new type of restaurant which had higher prices and more diverse cuisines than ordinary restaurants did.

After the three bitter years, the development of the economy and citizens' living standards stagnated and even deteriorated.¹⁰⁷ At the Xilou Conference for the Party in

¹⁰⁴ *Yuan* and *jiao* are similar to dollar and cent. 1 *yuan* is equal to 10 *jiao*.

¹⁰⁵ Mr. Bu, interview by author, December 27, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Mr. Zeng, interview by author, October 18, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Chen Yun, "Muqian caizheng jingji de qingkuang he kefu kunnan de ruogan banfa."

1962, Chen Yun made a speech entitled, “The current financial and economic situation and some ways to overcome difficulties.”¹⁰⁸ The speech, which earned every Party leader’s agreement, proposed several measures, one of which was manufacture of a few high-priced luxuries, making use of individual purchasing power to bring capital back into the hands of government.¹⁰⁹ Following the guidance from the central government, Wuhan labeled some sugars, pastries, teas, knitwear, bicycles, wristwatches, cigarettes, liquor, and restaurants as high-priced items.¹¹⁰ According to a report of the Wuhan Second Commercial Bureau in July 1961, from March to June, the high-priced restaurants in Wuhan reached 4,587,000 *yuan* in gross sales, 279,000 people spent 4.587 million *yuan* in 29 restaurants, and each customer spent 1.65 *yuan* on average.¹¹¹ A normal worker earned 30 *yuan* or so per month, which means eating in these restaurants for one meal would cost 5.5 percent of a normal worker’s one month salary. The report in 1962 shows that citizens’ consumption in the restaurants exceeded expectations.¹¹² This measure turned out to be an effective boost to national finance, and also illustrated that ordinary people did not strictly follow the doctrine of asceticism.

The policy about selling high-priced items demonstrated the conflicting priority of two goals: economic recovery and asceticism. To encourage more consumption of high-priced luxuries, the central government kept reducing prices. In 1962, the prices were

¹⁰⁸ Chen became the leader of the Finance and Economics Small Group right after the conference and gave advice on national economic adjustment measures. In the speech, Chen reported on adjustment policies in 1961, two of which directly related to urban living standards. One was to increase the production of daily necessities. If necessary, Chen said, the state should transfer raw materials and other resources from heavy to light industry, and import some raw materials.

¹⁰⁹ This translation is based on the text which appeared later in the openly published official version *Chen Yun wenxuan*. Roderick MacFarquhar uses a different version in the internally circulated volume *Chen Yun tongzhi wengao xuanbian*. MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, 190–2. Chen Yun, “Muqian caizheng jingji de qingkuang he kefu kunnan de ruogan banfa.”

¹¹⁰ Wuhan difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Wuhan shizhi: jingji guanli zhi*, 21.

¹¹¹ Dier shangye ju, *Guanyu gaojia canguan gongying qingkuang he jinhou yijian de baogao* [Report on the supply of restaurants with high prices and advice on the future development], July 16, 1962, WMA, xx000079-ws01-0747-0013.

¹¹² Dier shangye ju, *Gaojia canguan: 1962 nian shang bannian gongzuo zongjie* [Restaurants with high prices: Conclusion of the work in the first half of 1962], July 16, 1962, WMA, xx000079-ws01-0852-0007.

reduced twice.¹¹³ Some commodities were even allowed to be supplied openly without ration coupons.¹¹⁴ The state policy itself contradicted the doctrine of asceticism, which confused and misguided people's behaviour: my interviewees had no clue about this policy and had variable understandings of thriftiness.

When I asked my interviewees about the high-priced policy, they had very vague memories of it. Some recalled that they bought food in restaurants once in a while but never connected those restaurants with the high-priced policy. Others said that high-priced luxury was irrelevant to them due to their lack of money and coupons. The short term of this measure can be one possible reason; people had no time to understand and be familiar with it.¹¹⁵ Another explanation was related to ordinary people's definition of asceticism. I asked my interviewees who would eat in the high-priced restaurants. They imagined that the major customers would be the rich, probably involved in corruption, and would be labeled negatively. The official survey report in 1962, however, showed that workers and citizens were also regular consumers.¹¹⁶ My informants considered consuming in the high-priced restaurants as opposing asceticism, which was also against the authority's policies. To avoid any trouble, my interviewees refused to be associated

¹¹³ The prices of pastries, for example, first dropped from 3 yuan to 2.5 yuan per catty, and then declined to 2 yuan per catty. Dier shangye ju, *Guanyu tiaozheng gaojia shangpin jiage de tongzhi* [Announcement about adjusting the prices of high-priced commodities], July 31, 1962, WMA, xx000079-ws01-0870-0011; Diyi shangye ju, *Guanyu dierci jiangdi gaojia shangpin jiage de tongzhi* [Announcement about the second price reduction of high-priced commodities], October 29, 1962, WMA, xx000078-ws01-0629-0001.

¹¹⁴ Wuhan government received the instruction in April 1964 that the pastries maintained the same price, which was 1.5 yuan per catty, did not need grain ration coupons anymore. Dier shangye ju, *Sheng renmin weiyuanhui guanyu gaojia gaodian mianshou liangpiao de tongzhi* [Announcement of the provincial people's committee on high-priced pastries free of ration coupons], April 4, 1964, WMA, xx000079-ws01-1035-0006.

¹¹⁵ Accompanied by the recovery of the economy, in October 1963, all high-priced restaurants returned to be normal-priced. The high-priced restaurant policies only lasted two years. Diyi shangye ju, *Guanyu tingban gaojia canguan de tongzhi* [Announcement about the discontinuation of high-priced restaurants], July 18, 1963, WMA, xx000078-ws02-0952-0022.

¹¹⁶ According to the survey report, most of the customers who ate in high-priced restaurants were elites, workers, peasants, travelers, and retired people. Wuhan residents also purchased something cheap in the restaurants, for they only spent around 1 yuan while an average meal cost 3 to 4 yuan. Dier shangye ju, *Guanyu gaojia canguan gongying qingkuang he jinhou yijian de baogao* [Report on the supply of restaurants with high prices and advice on the future development], July 16, 1962, WMA, xx000079-ws01-0747-0013.

with consuming in a high-priced restaurant. They did not view themselves, or did not want to be viewed, as disobeying the Party's doctrine. Therefore, they ignored the high-priced items, and minimalized their consumption in restaurants by claiming that what they bought in restaurants was necessary and was beneficial to their both mental and physical health, thus aligning to their understanding of thriftiness.

Conclusion

The Party's propaganda of asceticism permeated ordinary people's daily lives and the word "thrift" became a mantra. My interviewees always mentioned the slogan of living a thrifty life and sincerely believed that they were putting asceticism in practice. But when it came to the details of their lives, they considered what they wanted and how much they had left. They spent more when they had choices and funds. Their understanding of thriftiness shifted into an alternative meaning: not spending money exceeding their rational budgets, wasting nothing, and benefiting from frugality. In their viewpoint, hence, buying higher priced food in a restaurant occasionally, rather than only eating at home or in the dining hall, was also a strategy for them to be thrifty. This idea also intertwined with the temporary measure of the high-priced restaurants. The measure successfully increased government revenue, and the Party believed that opening this kind of government-controlled restaurant helped to restrict the free market and put more resources under the control of the collective. Seemingly, ordinary people disobeyed the Party's intent of frugality, which was a failure of the propaganda. The nature of this method, however, is evidence that the Party accepted the uncontrollability of household consumption and made use of personal desires to reallocate resources, even partially sacrificing the principle of asceticism.

From individual perspectives, the three options were not exclusive. Ordinary people could mix and match, and flexibly switch to other dining types. The main factor was household preference and consuming desires. Even though citizens absorbed the idea of asceticism and valued saving, they did not negate their consuming impulses, and they rationalized consumerism under the disguise of asceticism. Then I wonder what the new generation of employees did to facilitate their self-interested choices. What were ordinary

people's coping strategies when their desires were incompatible with the authorities' requirements and policies? The next chapter, through analyzing people's strategies of saving, spending, and borrowing money, excavates how consumerism accommodated the economic system, and contributed to personal life and even the broader society.

Chapter 3.

A Secret Drawer: Family Budget and Consumption

“My wife and I both put our salaries and ration coupons in a drawer with no lock at home. When we needed to buy something, we always discussed before purchasing,” Mr. Bu, a professor, recalled, “Our spending money was based on how much we had in the drawer. We did not design a monthly budget, but we knew how much money we had. We would spend less when we had less.”¹¹⁷ They never considered depositing money in a bank. When I asked why, Mr. Bu shook his head and implied that it was too burdensome and useless to save in the bank. His explanation is related to the banking system in the 1960s as well as to family economic conditions. These two main reasons led to the new generation employees adopting household strategies of saving, spending, and borrowing money—a secret drawer with a family banking system. In this chapter, I show where Wuhan families saved their money, how households distributed power of spending money, and how they borrowed money for emergency and consumption. The process of decision-making in the household, which was autonomous and self-oriented, was driven by household requirements and personal desire. People’s strategies, sometimes working against the Party’s expectation or regulations, illustrated that individual private lives could be influenced but never strictly controlled by the government. Hanchao Lu interprets that surviving Shanghai bourgeoisie enjoying “fine clothes, expensive food, and extravagant parties” was to defend their individuality against the Communists.¹¹⁸ Jake Werner critiques the framework of defining the conflict between state and civil society as “everyday resistance.”¹¹⁹ Instead of viewing these strategies as resistance or rebellion against the Party-state, I argue that they are self-interested actions intertwining

¹¹⁷ Mr. Bu, interview by author, December 27, 2020.

¹¹⁸ Hanchao Lu, “Bourgeois Comfort under Proletarian Dictatorship: Home Life of Chinese Capitalists before the Cultural Revolution,” *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 1 (2018): 77.

¹¹⁹ Werner, “To Confront the Totality,” 725.

with the socio-political policies, and, to some degree, contributing to the development of the Party-state and the smooth function of the planned economic system.

A Secret Drawer: Saving in a Family Bank

During the 1960s, China only had a “monobank,” through which the government controlled financial flows and credit. The only purpose of this “state monopoly banking system” was to support national construction and industrialization.¹²⁰ Individuals depositing in the bank meant lending money to the state with low interest. In the “Five Goods” contest, the Party told people to live a thrifty life and emphasized two points: economizing on everything and depositing in the bank, thus accumulating capital in the “monobank” to sponsor state economic activities. One of the methods for the Wuhan Municipal Committee of the CCP to encourage citizens to learn through the acculturation of deposit was to put ordinary people’s stories of deposits on *Wuhan wanbao*. Hong’s family, for example, earned 200 *yuan* a month and were particularly rich from the perspective of their neighbours. They, however, were unwilling to buy a new coat and wore the same patched coat for more than six years. They saved money and deposited it in the bank. Hong claimed that deposits contributed to the funding of developing the country.¹²¹ Through reporting this type of stories, the Party wished that audiences, the ordinary people, would gradually think positive about saving money in the bank to “contribute to the state” and benefit their families.

The Party attempted to influence and even shape household consumption by shaping ordinary people’s ideology through propaganda. It turned out that what mattered for a family was its inner economic conditions instead of the outer political requirements. Household consumption styles and savings varied when families were in different economic conditions. But citizens held a common viewpoint about saving in the bank. “Why bother to put money in the bank? I just left it in the drawer at home. It was secure

¹²⁰ Naughton, *The Chinese Economy*, 61. Transactions between enterprises were settled through People’s Bank transfers. Through these procedures, the Bank was able to oversee and guarantee that resources were used in a planned way. Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism*, 20–22.

¹²¹ Hong Cheng, “Qinjian chijia chuxu hao” [Living frugally and saving money are good], *Wuhan wanbao*, August 11, 1962.

and easily accessible,” said Mr. Hu, who had graduated from college and became an engineer in the late 1950s.¹²² All my informants agreed with his idea that the secret drawer at home was much safer and more convenient for citizens to store their spare money than the bank. A drawer at home served as a family bank for deposits.

Stable Income and Expense

Employees in work units had a tiered payment structure, essentially controlling the income and expenditure of urban families and limiting the possibility of savings. In 1956, the State Council reformed the wage system to a Soviet-style system. The central government regulation set basic wage rates in state sectors, specifying thirty-two salary grades for administrative personnel and eight wage grades for workers.¹²³ Though the wage levels were upgraded intermittently, for most employees, especially the generation of new employees, wages were frozen.¹²⁴ Mr. Bu earned 53 yuan each month when he graduated from university and got a job in a university in 1961. His salary stayed unchanged throughout the decade.¹²⁵ While Mr. Bu did not express his dissatisfaction conspicuously, Mrs. Hu complained directly and strongly about earning 34.5 yuan per month for years. She vigorously emphasized, “I remember the specific amount clearly.” All my interviewees precisely and accurately provided the exact amounts of their salaries. They were impressed by the stagnation of their wages for such a prolonged time.

While wages remained consistent and the state-set prices were supposed to also be stable, fixed incomes and tight family budgets meant that there was no visible

¹²² Mr. Hu, interview by author, January 19, 2021.

¹²³ The salary grades in different work units, sectors, and regions progressively unified, with few adjustments for variations in local living costs. Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 59; Cao Zhi, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo renshi zhidu gaiyao* [The personnel system of the People’s Republic of China] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1985), 267; Wang, *Failure of Charisma*, 38.

¹²⁴ The Wuhan government, under the instructions of the central government, upgraded employees’ wage levels in 1959 and 1963. Wuhan shi zong gonghui, *Zhigong jingji shenghuo diaocha* [Survey of employees’ economic living standard], September 26, 1962, WMA, xx000091-ws01-0234-0005; Andrew G. Walder, “Wage Reform and the Web of Factory Interests,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 109 (1987): 23.

¹²⁵ Mr. Bu, interview by author, December 27, 2020.

accumulation of wealth for families.¹²⁶ There was no spare money in each month. Even if a particular month had a penny left, families would use it sooner or later. Maintaining a balance between receipts and expenditures was already a challenge in the household. Daily purchases normally required cash and coupons. If urbanities saved their money in the “monobank,” they would go through cumbersome administrative formalities to withdraw money, which was more complicated than taking money out of a drawer in household.

Supporting Extended Family

The transformation of family structure also hampered the money accumulation of urban families, and constituted an additional impediment to depositing in the national bank. Esherick rwrites that “the nature and meaning of family were in constant flux.”¹²⁷ Beginning in the 1920s, the multi-generation families started to splinter. The family structure switched from several generations gathering in one household to siblings living with their partners in different places. As a result of political campaigns of the 1950s and 60s, families were dispossessed of property and became dependent on jobs in work units. “Families even lost much of their ability to remain together, with substantial numbers split apart as a result of work assignments, political campaigns and other tumultuous events of the socialist era.”¹²⁸ The patriarch no longer existed, and the emotional bond replaced the blood tie to maintain the connections of family members. The separation fostered conjugal families in which the husband-wife pattern dominated and spouses were able to decide their own budgets.¹²⁹

Though spouses’ parents and extended kin did not interfere directly in conjugal family lives, they still affected and got involved in household expenditures. Couples’ monthly income not only had to cover daily expenses, but was also split to support

¹²⁶ Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 58.

¹²⁷ Esherick, *Ancestral Leaves*, 312.

¹²⁸ Martin King Whyte, “The Fate of Filial Obligations in Urban China,” *The China Journal*, no. 38 (1997): 2–3.

¹²⁹ Martin King Whyte, “The Fate of Filial Obligations in Urban China,” 3.

parents, siblings, and other relatives. In the 1960s, Mr. and Mrs. Bu earned 106 yuan each month, of which 15 yuan went to Mr. Bu's parents. The couple did not send money to Mrs. Bu's parents monthly, but Mrs. Bu would visit her parents on vacation. Travelling fees and gifts to her parents and relatives cost them around 100 yuan each time. Mr. Bu did not discuss and decide the assignment of money to each extended family with Mrs. Bu, but he believed that it was their responsibility to give money to support their parents, siblings who were still students and earned nothing, and relatives, especially the elders, in need. The couple, living separate from their parents and siblings, instead of feeling isolated, spared money to help their relatives in need and maintained the connections with their extended families.

Mr. Bu concluded that they were unable to save money over a sustained period and their family was vulnerable to any unforeseen event. Clark Kerr and his coauthors argue that "the extended family tends to dilute individual incentives to work, save, and invest."¹³⁰ This argument, although in a multi-generation family context, illuminates the reason for not saving. Working members were obligated to amalgamate their earnings to benefit all family members. The obligation still rooted in individuals' minds when the multi-generation family spilt into many conjugal families. As Mr. Bu did, most of my informants provided their partial incomes, despite different patterns of distribution, to support each spouse's kin, which made it hard for themselves to save money. A drawer at home then became the top choice for citizens to store money temporarily with easy access to checking the leftover money and withdrawing the money before spending.

With no large sum of money left monthly, citizens did not need to worry about the security of putting money in drawers. On the one hand, the money in the drawer was circulating fast and there was little surplus. The small amount was susceptible to management and supervision. On the other hand, as Mr. Bu explained, neighbours or colleagues were normally in similar economic situations; even thieves knew that the

¹³⁰ Clark Kerr, J. Dunlop, F. Harbison, and C. Myers, *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973), 94, quoted in Martin King Whyte, "The Chinese Family and Economic Development: Obstacle or Engine?" *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 45, no. 1 (1996): 3.

majority of ordinary people were in poverty with no money savings and they could steal nothing from these people's homes. Ms. Niu described the safety in a dramatic way through comparing the past with the present, "It was much safer at that time than nowadays. People were poor and the society was peaceful and safe. We usually left home with door unlocked, and at night, we could sleep soundly with the door wide open. But it is impossible to do the same thing today. Now we put three locks on doors and use security safes to store valuable assets."¹³¹ Ms. Niu, however, recalled the theft of quilts in the same period and official archives also recorded theft cases, proving that the society was not as safe as my interviewees described. Nevertheless, Mr. Bu and Ms. Niu said that, in their memory, they had nothing stolen and believed that the poverty guaranteed the security of their belongings. Nothing left meant nothing to lose. Following this logic, the drawer as a family bank was as safe as a real bank.

Spending Money in the Drawer: Power Distribution in Household

The transition of family structure gradually deprived patriarchs of the right of decision-making in the extended family, and enhanced conjugal families' economic emancipation and autonomy, making it possible to put money in the drawer. Young couples decided their budgets and controlled the distribution of capital and materials in household. Meanwhile, the transition corresponded with changes in women's social and domestic identities. During the imperial time, women were supposed to bear and raise children, do housework and needlework, oversee the domestic economy, and finally become a matriarchal icon of a prosperous extended family.¹³² They could not make decisions themselves and seldom went outside. The change in the twentieth century ensured the empowerment and advancement of women. Intertwined with women's demand to go out of the domestic sphere, the CCP, espousing egalitarianism, expected

¹³¹ Ms. Niu, interview by author, July 25, 2021.

¹³² On the changing position of women in modern China, see Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience, and Self-Perception in the Twentieth Century* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995); Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949–1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

women to work and solve the problem of urban labour shortages in 1958.¹³³ The Party's intention of "socializing domestic work" also contributed to women's liberation from the shackles of patriarchy.¹³⁴ Wives were experiencing an ongoing role change: "from subordinate domestic worker to equal partner in companionate marriage."¹³⁵

Formation of the nuclear family and women participating in work outside the home were a significant social change. But the gender division of labour remained entrenched both at home and at work. Women encountered the same tasks with men at work, but still were responsible for pregnancy, childcare, buying clothing and food, and other endless housework.¹³⁶ The dual work burden of women was still a pressing issue when Li Yinhe studied family relations in five cities in 2008.¹³⁷

"Financial Minister" in Households: Memory between Men and Women

Regarding the issue of conjugal equality, I designed a question that directly asked who had real power in controlling money. Most of my informants replied that husband and wife had equal power. Mr. Bu, for example, said that he discussed with his wife before using money, especially buying something expensive.¹³⁸ Though he did not share the detailed discussing process, Mr. Bu pointed out the existence of negotiation between spouses. The equality, however, was not achieved perfectly as it was claimed to be.

The husbands, on the one hand, attempted to show the equality by saying that they discussed before making decisions; on the other hand, they naturally admitted that the wives oversaw domestic expenditures. Mr. Sun frankly admitted, "My wife handled the family budgets. I would tell her my needs and she would buy things for me," but in a dignified way by giving a reason, "She is a better accountant than me because she always

¹³³ Day, "Breaking with the Family Form," 882–4.

¹³⁴ Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 60.

¹³⁵ Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, 110.

¹³⁶ Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 62.

¹³⁷ Yinhe Li, "Report on Investigations of Family Formation and Family Relations in Five Cities," *The China Society Yearbook* 5 (2011): 166.

¹³⁸ Mr. Bu, interview by author, December 27, 2020.

knows what the most suitable and economical item is.”¹³⁹ Mr. Sun attributed the fact that women still were responsible for housework to their talented nature of calculation and managing family works. But in essence his idea was the heritage of the unequal housework division pattern in a multi-generation family.

This common gendered labour division pattern was obvious when it comes to my interviewees’ memory of spending details. In women’s memory, as Hershatter indicates, family matters and daily lives took up more space than state affairs.¹⁴⁰ One of the reasons was that it cost women energy and time to manage family budget and chores, leaving them no time to be concerned about state affairs. Dealing with buying clothing and food almost every day made them familiar with the prices of daily goods and allowed them to become a so-called “better accountant.” Women I interviewed could easily recall the prices of bak choi and children’s tuition fees, while the men mentioned them ambiguously. But they could mention the prices of a few items that they were cared about. Mr. Zeng clearly remembered the price of a radio. Listening to Chinese opera was his hobby. But he could not afford the price of a radio, so he made one by himself and proudly told me that he saved hundreds of *yuan*.¹⁴¹ The only exception was Mr. Liu. He mentioned his experience of comparing the prices of meat in cafeterias and markets, paying electricity and water bills, and purchasing milk powder for his child. “I was the one who was in charge of purchasing daily goods in 1962. My wife was pregnant. It was inconvenient for her to go outside. I then held the power.”¹⁴² But his memory of prices and spending money on daily necessities became vague in the following years when his wife returned to power as the family financial minister.

The Party, although it was committed to creating a gender-equal social structure, was itself “a male-dominated institution.”¹⁴³ The “feminist agenda of gender equality was

¹³⁹ Mr. Sun, interview by author, October 18, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory*, 261–3.

¹⁴¹ Mr. Zeng, interview by author, October 18, 2020.

¹⁴² Mr. Bu, interview by author, December 27, 2020.

¹⁴³ Esherick, *Ancestral Leaves*, 239–40.

inevitably subordinated to the cause of building socialism.”¹⁴⁴ When the Party wanted individuals to contribute to the recovery of the state economy in the early 1960s, the government policies unavoidably would take advantage of the firm tie between women and the household. The Party emphasized women’s responsibility for maintaining frugality at home. The Wuhan Women’s Federation instructed in 1961 that women should be good housekeepers who designed a tight budget, cherished each grain of rice, improved cooking skills, and fed the whole family with the minimum cost.¹⁴⁵ The federation then organized a symposium of typical people, experience exchange sessions, and other various activities to encourage women to educate themselves and live a frugal life with their families.¹⁴⁶ The newspaper also kept publicizing the outstanding models who usually were wives in the “Five Good” campaigns.¹⁴⁷

Sewing Machines: Women’s Realm of Spending, Saving, and Earning Money

Following the idea that “thriftiness in running the household,” cherishing every piece of cloth and recycling worn clothing was beneficial to one’s family. Using a sewing machine, a woman could make clothes for all her family members and change the size or the style of clothing for practicality. A family with a number of children could use hand-me-down clothing to economize cloth by using sewing machines to alter the size for the next child.¹⁴⁸ A sewing machine allowed a woman to patch up holes more efficient than sewing by hand using a needle. From this perspective, a sewing machine, as a tool of

¹⁴⁴ Day, “Breaking with the Family Form,” 883.

¹⁴⁵ Wuhan shi funü lianhe hui, *Guanyu jiedao kaizhan shengchan zijiu jieyue duhuang de yijian* [Suggestions about developing self-saving production to survive the famine in the neighbourhood], October 4, 1961, WMA, xx000093-ws01-0135-0022.

¹⁴⁶ “Zai quanshi guangfan shenru kaizhan wuhao yundong” [Broadly organizing the “Five Goods” campaign in the entire city], *Wuhan wanbao*, January 7, 1962.

¹⁴⁷ “Huiguo rizi de zhufu” [A wife who is good at budgeting], *Wuhan wanbao*, December 17, 1961.

¹⁴⁸ “They [foot-powered sewing machines] were needed to make the most efficient use of cloth rations: premade clothing was a less efficient use of the ration coupons.” Walder, *China Under Mao*, 96.

saving, was a symbol of women managing the family budget, which was advocated by the Party.

Known as one of the Three Greats in the 1960s, however, a sewing machine was considered a luxury, and sometimes was a symbol of a wealthy family and was valued in marriage.¹⁴⁹ Purchasing a sewing machine cost more than 100 *yuan*, which was equivalent to three months' wages for a normal worker on average. Buying one would disrupt the balance in the secret drawer.¹⁵⁰ From this perspective, the sewing machine was unnecessary for covering basic living requirements, and fueled people's desire for nicer things.¹⁵¹

The sewing machine's application in producing a family's own clothing and earning money even expanded material desires. Women could use machines to alter their clothing to be more fashionable or better fitting, which might be a distraction from sticking to an ascetic lifestyle. This application was not unique worldwide. Scholars share the idea that the sewing machine, though serving as a symbol of women's housework duty, was a way for women to find pleasure, create diversity, and pursue individuality.¹⁵² "I could design, sew, and wear unique clothes. I enjoyed sewing and spent all my spare time on it," said Ms. Su, "I even sewed clothes for others off work and earned additional money once or twice."¹⁵³ The skillful women in the 1960s had one more method to supplement family incomes through making use of her reputation in the neighbourhood and running household cloth-sewing business in private.

With the confusing policies of asceticism and variable definition of thriftiness, it was not surprising that purchasing a sewing machine became a household decision. Citizens could choose to buy one when they could afford the price and the machine was

¹⁴⁹ Gerth, *Unending Capitalism*, 24.

¹⁵⁰ Mr. Liu, interview by author, November 2, 2020.

¹⁵¹ Gerth, *Unending Capitalism*, 23.

¹⁵² Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 40; Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15.

¹⁵³ Ms. Su, interview by author, January 3, 2021.

accessible in stores. The sewing machine, standing for women's strategies of saving materials, meeting fashionable demands, and earning extra money, was closely associated to femininity. But the purchase of it was not a pure women's realm. As I mentioned earlier in this section, my informants would discuss before purchasing expensive things. In the process of buying a sewing machine, they had a power distribution pattern. Mrs. Cheng recalled that Mr. Cheng was the one who made the final decision to buy a sewing machine, but she was the one who prepared money and coupons for months and went to the store to buy the item.¹⁵⁴ Husband often dominated the decision-making process, while wife served as a financial minister of family who managed and implemented specific economic affairs. This, again, explains why men normally recall general things, and women remember family-related items in detail.

Conjugal families could not save money over a sustained period because their incomes stagnated and they had to support their extended families. But items such as sewing machines that helped to save and earn money successfully created the fuel for their desires. How could Mrs. Cheng manage to accumulate enough money to buy a sewing machine? The next section will analyze people's strategies of saving and raising additional money for luxuries like a sewing machine.

Empty Drawer: Raising and Borrowing Money

Most families were unable to save money. Having such a tight budget, the family could pay their bills in routine times. But the balance would be broken easily, when the couple wanted luxuries, such as a sewing machine; or encountered unexpected accidents or family members falling ill. The optimal coping strategy was to borrow money or apply for relief to cope with the empty drawers. Borrowing from the bank, however, was never the answer. The "monobank" only lent money to a work unit that could contribute to national projects, but for commoners, it only offered money deposit services rather than loan services. Ordinary people could only apply for relief or a loan from the government

¹⁵⁴ Mr. Cheng and Mrs. Cheng, interview by author, January 4, 2021.

in two official ways: one was through Residents' Committees, the other was through the work unit.

***Kunnanhu*: Raising Money in Official Ways**

In 1962, the Wuhan Federation of Trade Unions launched a survey of family economic living standards. In the report, analysts defined families that had less than 12 *yuan* for each person per month as *kunnanhu*, which literally means a family in difficulty.¹⁵⁵ Those *kunnanhu* applied for government relief from the residents' committees. But according to the regulations, each family could receive no more than 6 *yuan* each month, which did not fully cover daily expenses.¹⁵⁶ Because of the limit of funding, not every family in difficulty could receive relief.

Work units also had funding to support workers in the collective who urgently needed money for medical treatment, weddings, funerals, and other significant matters. To acquire the money, individuals submitted written materials and waited for relevant committees to examine and approve. A file from the Wuhan Municipal Administration for Industry and Commerce displays the case of Mr. Yao.¹⁵⁷ Yao worked at this administration in 1963. He and his wife earned 91 *yuan* every month to support a family with six members. Yao's father used his own salary to raise the other five household members. In July, Yao's father got sick and was hospitalized, losing his job and income. So Yao had to use 91 *yuan* to support twelve people's lives and owed the hospital 200 *yuan* for medical treatments. The whole family was penniless and deeply in debt, meeting the official standard of *kunnanhu*. He kept submitting his applications to his work unit. His work unit only had 30 *yuan* each month to support workers in difficulties. After providing Yao with 45 *yuan* and lending him 20 *yuan*, the work unit failed to meet Yao's

¹⁵⁵ Wuhan shi zong gonghui, *Zhigong jingji shenghuo diaocha* [Survey of employees' economic living standard], September 26, 1962, WMA, xx000091-ws01-0234-0005.

¹⁵⁶ Wuhan shi minzheng ju, *Guanyu Qiuchang jie kunnanhu shenghuo qingkuang de diaocha cailiao* [Materials of living conditions of people in poverty on Qiuchang Street], September 3, 1962, WMA, xx000083-ws01-0581-0005.

¹⁵⁷ Wuhan shi gongshang guanli ju, *Wei jiejie Yao Guangtao tongzhi jiating shenghuo kunnan wenti de baogao* [Report on solving the difficulties in Yao Guangtao's family], September 2, 1963, WMA, xx000076-ws01-1376-0013.

needs, stating that many other workers like Yao were still in crisis, so the funding could not cover all the demands. In the refusal letter, the work unit explained that Yao's father was not an official member of their unit, so they advised Yao to turn to the residents' committee. Unfortunately, the staff in the committee also rejected Yao's application because they did not subsidize people, like Yao, who worked in a work unit, ignoring the fact that Yao's father lost his job and had no work unit.

The archive does not tell what happened to Yao's family. But the procrastination and shirking responsibility in this case indicates that demand for relief funds outstripped the capacity of work units and Residents' Committees. In my imagination, management institutions and policies could be simple and straightforward. But it was practically difficult to divide power between institutions and this led to inefficiency and complexity in applying procedures. Coping with the inconvenience of borrowing money officially, citizens had no other choice but to raise money from disparate sources through personal connections, soliciting modest contributions from a network of friends, relatives, and neighbours.

***Hui*: Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCA)**

Instead of borrowing money directly from a certain person, ordinary people preferred a basic system of grassroots finance called *hui*, rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCA). I asked my informants why they did not borrow money directly. They indicated that, on the one hand, they felt embarrassed to ask for money from others face-to-face; on the other hand, all their neighbours and friends were in similar economic conditions, so there was no opportunity to borrow a large amount of money from them.

The main characteristic of the ROSCA was that a set of members committed to contributing a certain amount of money into a pot monthly and borrowed the money in the pot in order.¹⁵⁸ The form of the ROSCA protected individuals' dignity because it

¹⁵⁸ Rongzhu Ke and Min Ye, "The Practice of Rotating Saving and Credit Associations and Interest Rate Liberalization—A Case Study of Wenzhou," *The Chinese Economy* 52, no. 2 (2019): 155–70.

saved people from begging to borrow money. Creditors always worried about debtors' repaying capability. With the institutional promise that each contributor will in turn receive a share of a similarly large sum of money, *hui* reduced the risk of default. The borrower usually rotated every month, hence the order was important to those who were in crisis. The order was determined in various ways, which shaped different forms of ROSCA. The original and basic one was that the members bid for the earlier position by offering to pay higher interest on the loan. When the competition became fierce and extreme, it might lead to usurious rates.

The government, with limitations on official subsidies, utilized this individual coping strategy, hoping citizens could smoothly go through economic difficulties, but reshaped it for better supervision. In 1951, the Wuhan Municipal Committee of the CCP required that all government institutions and labour unions lead residents to establish the mutual aid associations (*huzhuhui*).¹⁵⁹ The association was an unofficial organization and employees in a work unit could participate voluntarily through saving partial salaries there. Participants in need could apply for a low-interest loan from the association, instead of bidding for it. Though defining the citizens' mutual aid associations as unofficial organizations, the government granted funding to support their establishment and made use of them to suppress the ROSCA and the usury. An article about the associations in *Wuhan wanbao* in 1962 illustrated that these organizations had existed for a long time and that the Party had consistently endorsed them.¹⁶⁰ Ms. Xiong also joined the association in her work unit and pointed out, "The so-called 'voluntariness' was actually an 'obligation.' Because most people were members of the association, you did not want to be an exception. And everyone would encounter difficulties one day. Joining the association was a precautionary approach. In the end, almost everyone became a member."¹⁶¹ The side-effect of the associations was that, because *huzhuhui* could directly

¹⁵⁹ Wuhan difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Wuhan shizhi: jinrong zhi* [Wuhan gazetteer: Finance] (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 1989), 222.

¹⁶⁰ "Qunzhong huanyin de huzhu chujin hui," [Popular mutual saving associations], *Wuhan wanbao*, August 11, 1962.

¹⁶¹ Ms. Xiong, interview by author, November 1, 2020.

transfer a portion of employees' wages through work units, even fewer citizens deposited in the "monobank."

Huzhuhui were regarded a form of social insurance in case of emergencies, but it did not finance expensive consumer products, such as a bicycle, a watch, and other coveted items for citizens.¹⁶² When official methods failed to facilitate personal material desires, individuals then turned to the ROSCA again. The variety of ROSCA in Wuhan in the 1960s requires more data and documents to verify. My informants told me that they chose a more private and simple way. Mr. Sun recalled his experience of buying a radio but he did not give me a clear timeline. He explained that they gathered really close friends to build a small association, in which all the members had the same intention of buying one radio. The order was shaped through negotiation rather than competition. "Because we were close friends, we could discuss at the very beginning, and we let the most desperate one be the first purchaser. Then it saved us a bid." The radio cost him about 100 *yuan*, which was equivalent to two months' wages. By contributing ten *yuan* each month to the special ten-member association, in turn each participant could purchase a radio.¹⁶³ This small association dissolved immediately once all members achieved their goals. Regardless of the government's negative attitude towards the ROSCA, this small-scale, friend-based, and short-term association tangibly facilitated individual material demands. Mr. Sun did not consider this private activity as their resistance against broader policies, instead he believed that this was a pragmatic method to align to the Party's intention of improving personal living conditions. This method provided a channel for money flowing out of the administrative control in the grey area, which was apparently against the government policies. But the longevity of the ROSCA suggests that the government's focus on boosting the national economy meant that it would not or was unable to forbid it in the private sphere.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Kellee S. Tsai, "Banquet Banking: Gender and Rotating Savings and Credit Associations in South China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 161 (2000): 146.

¹⁶³ Mr. Sun, interview by author, October 18, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ The private ROSCA is a potential research topic. I did not find enough evidence from documents and archives to make the topic a central part of my thesis. Future research on ROSCA in the 1960s is required.

Conclusion

The Party's advocacy of asceticism and negative attitude toward consumerism left space for individuals to save and borrow money in official ways. Ordinary people then figured out coping strategies, which included depositing money at home in a drawer and borrowing money from the ROSCA. The strategies provided citizens with a guarantee to cope with emergencies or afford the prices of commodities they craved. The Party recognized the associations' effect on supporting people in difficulties and encouraged establishing *huzhuhui*, which were reshaped ROSCA under the Party's supervision. But individual desires for commodities were not covered by *huzhuhui*, thus leading to the long existence of private ROSCA, countering the Party's goal of eliminating these organizations. Consumerism-driven coping strategies, although sometimes going against the Party's aspiration, were not restricted by official regulations and instead supplemented the areas that the "monobank" and policies did not cover, letting individual power shape the economic system. In the next chapter, I will discuss the effect of individual behaviours on the broader economic system by putting the spotlight on illicit economic activities. What were the Party's attitudes towards illicit trading? What kinds of roles did my informants play in these economic activities? How did they think of these illicit activities?

Chapter 4.

Illicit Trading: Is It Dark White or Light Black?

Borrowing money from others or organizations was a way for employed citizens who had stable incomes to raise extra money. Besides that, people did some sideline work to accumulate extra wealth. Mr. Sun wrote articles for magazines and newspapers in his leisure time.¹⁶⁵ For each article, he earned between 0.5 to 1 *yuan*. Other than focusing on the price of each article and his contribution to his family, Mr. Sun emphasized his uniqueness, because it was not only an exclusive method (not every person could write articles), but also a recognition of his writing skills from publishers.

Apart from Sun's rational but exclusive method to increase his family income, the Party encouraged citizens to participate in sideline work to improve their living standards. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, women could use sewing machines to produce clothing at home to earn additional money. Household sideline productions like this, however, were not as above-board as Sun's, although they were in the line of the Party's guidance to improve living standards. According to official statistics, in 1960, Wuhan government urged citizens to reclaim 12,000 *mu* of scattered lands around buildings and by the side of roads to grow vegetables and promote dwellers' self-sufficiency.¹⁶⁶ The land reclamation, though the government promoted it, was not organized collectively or totally controlled by the government. Mr. Liu's father, after retiring, moved to live with Liu, and found a spare place near their apartment to cultivate vegetables, so that they could eat more green foods. Bearing the idea that the host of private farming had the right to allocate all the output on his own, Liu's father gave some of the excess vegetables to his neighbours as gifts, and then sold the rest. But Liu's father's private agricultural trading was illegal.

¹⁶⁵ Mr. Sun, interview by author, October 18, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Wuhan difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Wuhan shizhi: jingji guanli zhi*, 21.

The government, however, did not hold the same attitude towards all those illicit profit earning activities consistently. It had differentiated criteria for dealing with people who had diverse motivations, identities, and conduits to get themselves involved in illicit economic activities. More than the known “black” activities—speculations in black markets—in scholarly literatures because of the rules and crackdowns, illicit profit earning activities also includes “grey” activities that were treated leniently by the government. But the criteria also varied based on the policymakers’ analysis of political and financial situations at the time.¹⁶⁷ Because of the policies’ instability and uncertainty, illicit trading did not have a clear official definition. In this chapter, I dive into the Party’s attitude towards different illicit economic activities and my informants’ self-oriented point of view. The self-interested illicit profit-earning activities filled the gap—the broader economic system could not fulfill each individual need and desire. The Party’s lenient treatment of some illegal activities and the notable staying power of those activities together illustrated that personal behaviour could help the national economic system function smoothly and shape the society.

Free Markets

During the GLF, small businessmen received ideological education and private companies were transformed into collective cooperatives under the control of state-run companies. Through 1960 91.32 percent of sole proprietors in Wuhan had been transformed and there were only 3,612 self-employed entrepreneurs. The state then basically controlled the market, along with the rationing system and the price system. The post-1961 economic adjustment policies led to “the revival of ‘free’ markets, increases in the number of cooperative shops, the reintroduction of household plots and the encouragement of sideline economic activities.”¹⁶⁸ In 1961, due to the decline of

¹⁶⁷ Feng Xiaocai, “Yijiu wuba nian zhi yijiu liusan nian zhonggong ziyou shichang zhengce yanjiu” [The study on the free market policy of the CPC from 1958 to 1963], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, no. 2 (2015): 52.

¹⁶⁸ Regina M. Abrami, “Self-making, Class Struggle and Labor Autarky: The Political Origins of Private Entrepreneurship in Vietnam and China” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002), 243.

agricultural production during the three bitter years, some marketplaces for farmers to sell non-staple foods were opened in urban areas in Wuhan.¹⁶⁹ Peasants could sell their spare foods to urbanities in exchange for money and industrial commodities. A fair degree of freedom was also granted to private vendors and handicraftsmen. Vendors with authorized permission, who were called “socialist peddlers,” were allowed to self-finance the retail business. But some essential products, such as grain, cotton, and oil were still banned from free markets or permitted only after state delivery quotas were met.¹⁷⁰

Solinger summarizes the logic of revitalizing small business for the socialist state: “The flexible technological base of small trade, and the quick fix its rapid turnover could give to the ailing urban economy, made its restoration both possible and attractive in the early post-Leap recovery period.”¹⁷¹ Vegetable vending trolleys and cooked food mobile stalls appeared in the streets and alleys, greatly satisfying the masses and providing more food to urbanities. The government, by reopening the free markets, increased the supply of foods in urban areas and relieves pressure on rationed agricultural goods, after which it cut the prices of daily goods and suppressed speculation.

Categories of Illicit Profit Earning Activities

In the process of opening free markets and the encouragement of self-sufficient sideline work, ordinary people seized the opportunity to develop their personal “sideline work” without official permission, “transforming official encouragement of self-reliance (*zili gengsheng*) into a kind of self-strengthening exercise,” as Abrami writes.¹⁷² Chen Yun mentioned this situation in free markets in his speech. He separated those activities into two groups, one was professional speculators who earned a lot of money by being middlemen to resell productions but never working and producing; the other was peasants

¹⁶⁹ Wuhan shi gongshang guanli ju, *Liangnian lai chengshi jishi maoyi guanli gongzuo jiben zongjie* [Brief conclusion of the management of the free markets in two years], October 22, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0276-0010.

¹⁷⁰ The early 1960s also saw a revival of the very smallest types of firms, those whose operators had been eliminated as independent traders in the few previous years. Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism*, 24, 46, 198.

¹⁷¹ Solinger, *Chinese Business Under Socialism*, 199.

¹⁷² Abrami, “Self-making, Class Struggle and Labor Autarky,” 289.

who only sold agricultural products produced by themselves.¹⁷³ Scholars' definitions of the illicit profit earning activities have more detailed categories than Chen's. Feng Xiaocai divides markets and trading into three categories: "planned market," "free market," and "black market."¹⁷⁴ Among these, the black market referred to all illicit trading that was outside of government management. Different from Feng, Regina M. Abrami draws distinctions of the illicit economic activities. Abrami contends that "informal economy" consisted of two categories: "second economy," typically refers to "private, quasi-legal activities," and "third economy," to "illegal vendors trading in legal goods, but in the wrong place and without license."¹⁷⁵ Karl Gerth, in contrast, uses the term "gray economy" to define illicit consumption activities, and differentiates this from the "underground economy," referring to economic activities that are hidden from the state, or "black market," meaning economic activities that are conducted in opposition to the state.¹⁷⁶

Developing from those definitions, I divide the illicit profit earning activities in the early 1960s into two parts: "black" activities—professional speculations; and "grey" activities. I further subdivide "grey" activities into people selling spare things and peddlers with no business licenses. The division, mainly according to an official survey of Wuhan black markets in 1962, reveals the government's attitude.¹⁷⁷ My division combines with the attitude of my informants who normally were buyers rather than sellers, or self-defined outsiders (using hearsays, conjunctions, or media reports as the basis of their communications). They did not understand or care about illicit activities' impact on the state.

¹⁷³ Chen Yun, "Muqian caizheng jingji de qingkuang he kefu kunnan de ruogan banfa."

¹⁷⁴ Feng, "Yijiu wuba nian zhi yijiu liusan nian zhonggong ziyou shichang zhengce yanjiu," 51.

¹⁷⁵ Abrami, "Self-making, Class Struggle and Labor Autarky," 235, 239.

¹⁷⁶ Karl Gerth, *Unending Capitalism*, 31, 246, 248.

¹⁷⁷ Gongshang guanli ju, *Dangqian shichang shang liangyou ji liangyou fuzhipin ziyou maimai he heishi touji huodong de diaocha* [Survey of free transactions of grains, oil, and their productions, and speculations in black market at present], August 3, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0277-0012.

Spare Things

Ms. Yao recalled that lots of peasants in the suburbs carried two baskets with one shoulder pole and roamed the streets to sell vegetables, fish, or chickens. They could also deliver the foods to your front door. She told me that this was the most common way for all of her neighbours to buy fresh food, because they were cheap and did not require ration coupons. The sellers were peasants and normal citizens who sold their spare foods and coupons in exchange for money and other coupons, the ultimate goal of which was to buy what they desired. In selling things for money, they were not speculative professions. But what they sold included grains, oil, and ration coupons, goods that the state regulations did not allow to be privately exchanged.

Customers, like Ms. Yao, did not care about the consequence of free flows of grains, instead they thought buying these illicit grains was economical and convenient because they had more access to the grains and could negotiate on the prices. When I asked Yao why she did not buy such goods at state-run stores or markets, she replied that there were usually empty shelves in these stores. Her reply implied that people selling spare things, as an effective remedy of the planned economy, was the consequence of the state's failure of providing her citizens enough necessities. Yao also emphasized the convenience of buying foods from peddlers. "You did not need to step outside. You could yell through the window and ask them to provide door-to-door service. It is just like an online shopping with door-to-door express delivery today."¹⁷⁸ Purchasing in this way, in her view, was common; she never expected this to be illicit.

Similar conversations happened when I interviewed other people. They even claimed that buying vegetables from vendors was legitimate, partially because the majority did the same thing. Abrami finds similar situations in Chengdu in the early 1960s. She points out that only a segment of urban vendors were real farmers, and the rest were "long distance agricultural traders and individuals from the countryside who purchased goods in suburban Chengdu markets to re-sell in the urban core."¹⁷⁹ I

¹⁷⁸ Ms. Yao, interview by author, October 22, 2020.

¹⁷⁹ Abrami, "Self-making, Class Struggle and Labor Autarky," 246.

categorize re-selling purchased goods into the black activities that were treated more seriously by the government than selling spare things. Following this logic, those that informants regarded as legitimate activities were bad ones from the government perspective. But there was no need for citizens who only purchased to know those sellers' identities. What they cared about was the products they wanted and the prices. So for them, real farmers and speculators in this case were the same. In their explanations, they, at worst, only participated in the quasi-legal economic activities.

One official survey report reflects sellers' understanding that selling spare grain and coupons was reasonable because they were the owners. The traders' behaviour of selling illicit goods can be regarded, as what Abrami calls, the "reconfiguration of property rights," representing the rise of selfhood—the individual.¹⁸⁰ They claimed righteous possession over the products and commodified them through putting a price on and selling them. In the same report, one government official commented that when the peasants had their private plots and had spare foods, opening free markets for non-staple foods was inevitable.¹⁸¹ This statement has two aspects. First, peasants selling spare non-staple food was legitimate in the free market. Second, the government still did not officially accept personal trading in staple food. But, as another government report shows, selling spare foods and coupons, for individuals, was an attempt to avoid wasting and to optimize utilization of spare things.¹⁸² Plus, they aided the supply of food for urbanities. In the early 1960s, as Feng believes, the government, considering the situation of food shortage, would tolerate open illicit trading in grain to boost the economy.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Abrami, "Self-making, Class Struggle and Labor Autarky," 289–90.

¹⁸¹ Wuhan shi gongshang guanli ju, *Liangnian lai chengshi jishi maoyi guanli gongzuo jiben zongjie* [Brief conclusion of the management of the free markets in two years], October 22, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0276-0010.

¹⁸² Gongshang guanli ju, *Dangqian shichang shang liangyou ji liangyou fuzhipin ziyou maimai he heishi touji huodong de diaocha* [Survey of free transactions of grains, oil, and their productions, and speculations in black market at present], August 3, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0277-0012.

¹⁸³ Feng, "Yijiu wuba nian zhi yijiu liusan nian zhonggong ziyou shichang zhengce yanjiu," 51.

Unlicensed Peddlers

Another grey activity, in the official survey report, was those peddlers with no business licenses or official permission, especially handicraftsmen and cooked food vendors. They earned money through selling another form of spare thing—personal labour and skills, and their products were usually affordable. The majority of the vendors were unemployed urban workers and civil sector employees.¹⁸⁴

My informants recalled some unlicensed sideline work in which they got involved. As Ms. Su reminisced, a middle-aged unemployed widow who lived in an adjoining building opened a private nursery at her home. When her neighbours worked in the daytime, she would take care of their children.¹⁸⁵ She charged each child 2 to 3 *yuan* per month. The parents prepared their children's food every morning and delivered the children and the food to the nursery before going to work. Ms. Su explained that this was the only method for the widow to earn her living, so she chose to also send her child there to support the widow. She did not say why she did not let her child stay in her work unit's kindergarten. But the case shows that citizens like Ms. Su tolerated and supported the unlicensed grey activities which helped unemployed people improve their lives.

This is a unique case because Ms. Su, as a customer, knew the experience of the vendor, the widow. But commonly buyers, like my informants, neither paid attention to peddlers' motivation of starting such an illegal business, nor minded the illegitimate elements within the goods. Cooked food vendors sold various food including noodles, steamed buns, Chinese donuts, soybean milk, bean jelly, and mung bean soup. The main problem was that their sources of food materials were usually illegal. They probably bought grains from speculators with no ration coupons. But customers preferred the unlicensed peddlers, because they could purchase diverse cooked foods without ration coupons but still at cheap prices. A pedicab worker commented, "A bowl of steamed rice

¹⁸⁴ Abrami, "Self-making, Class Struggle and Labor Autarky," 246.

¹⁸⁵ Ms. Su, interview by author, January 3, 2021.

and a dish of vegetables only cost 0.4 yuan. Comparing to restaurants, it was not expensive. Besides, I did not pay the ration coupons. It was worthwhile.”¹⁸⁶

Only the licensed vendors expressed their dissatisfaction in the survey. Unlicensed peddlers undermined licensed vendors’ interests, resulting in their loss of profits. Though they harmed the feelings of licensed peddlers, they undoubtedly contributed to the prosperity of markets and promotion of urban living standards. They also experienced the tacit and ambiguous attitude from the government. A prevailing method to earn extra income for women was sewing clothes for others after work. They could use their sewing machines at home to help those who did not possess a machine or were unable to use it in exchange for money and specific commodities. The transactions were apparently in private without any operating license, but they were even encouraged by the government. In 1962, some Residents’ Committees in Wuhan organized women to accept orders of stitching clothes from factory workers to earn money.¹⁸⁷ The circulation of money was out of the government’s control, and women did not have a clear industrial standard to follow. In this case, the government considered the grey activities as a temporary method to help unemployed families. When the living standard improved, the Wuhan government educated the unlicensed people and issued temporary business licenses to standardize the market order.¹⁸⁸ Feng considers the licenses as the sign that the government, in 1963, began to change its attitude and control the market tightly.¹⁸⁹ But this change did not mean the disappearance of vendors. Or the government was incapable of eliminating this type of grey activities. Because, as I mentioned earlier, customers did not care about license and legitimacy, what they valued was the price. Once the

¹⁸⁶ Gongshang guanli ju, *Dangqian shichang shang liangyou ji liangyou fuzhipin ziyou maimai he heishi touji huodong de diaocha* [Survey of free transactions of grains, oil, and their productions, and speculations in black market at present], August 3, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0277-0012.

¹⁸⁷ Wuhan shi minzheng ju, *Guanyu Qiuchang jie kunnanhu shenghuo qingkuang de diaocha cailiao* [Materials of living conditions of people in poverty on Qiuchang Street], September 3, 1962, WMA, xx000083-ws01-0581-0005.

¹⁸⁸ Wuhan shi gongshang guanli ju, *Liangnian lai chengshi jishi maoyi guanli gongzuo jiben zongjie* [Brief conclusion of the management of the free markets in two years], October 22, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0276-0010.

¹⁸⁹ Feng, “Yijiu wuba nian zhi yijiu liusan nian zhonggong ziyou shichang zhengce yanjiu,” 46.

government-permitted supply failed to meet people's demand, citizens would turn to unofficial peddlers.

Middlemen

The black economic activity refers to professional speculators who acted as middlemen reselling coupons and commodities at high prices in enormous amounts. Speculators in Wuhan usually gathered in the morning and evening in ten main sites to sell at high prices alongside legal markets, thus forming the “black markets.” Contrary to the former two categories, the state appeared to be resolute about cracking down on speculation. Those professional speculators not directly involved in production artificially provoked price inflation, which disrupted the state planning system. Yuan Jianwu, who was unemployed, aligned with Sun Jiadao, his brother-in-law, and his friend Gao Yinghui, the director of an electric repair cooperative factory, to speculate ramie, which was the main material of fishing net. Yuan first investigated customers' demand in Shanghai markets, Sun sold his wristwatch and successfully raised 220 *yuan* as their start-up funding, and then Gao used his personal connections to convince leaders of the Ministry of Aquaculture to sell them ramies. They bought 360 catties of ramies in total, and on the way to Shanghai, they sold 160 catties and earned profit of 300 *yuan*. They got caught in Shanghai when they tried to buy clothes and clothing in quantity. All their money and materials related to the speculation were confiscated by the government. Sun and Gao received criticism and punishments in their work units. Yuan was put under the surveillance of the Residents' Committee in his neighbourhood.¹⁹⁰ Similar cases frequently appeared in archives, showing that there were many profiteers, and presented the government's firm suppression on speculations in the black market. But speculation was never eliminated under the tight restriction of the state and permeated the period of

¹⁹⁰ Gongshang guanli ju, *Guanyu Sun Jiadao Yuan Jianwu deng wanglai Jiayu Shanghai congshi heishi touji de diaocha ji chuli yijian de baogao* [Report about the survey of Sun Jiadao, Yuan Jianwu, and etc. speculating between Jiayu and Shanghai and the sentence suggestions], November 12, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-1289-0040.

China's socialist planned economy. People's material desire was one of the reasons that kept speculation alive. The Party's contradictory attitude also played a role.

The Party leaders realized this situation but could never admit the legality of speculation, because they believed that this doubtlessly would destroy the planned economic system, leading to catastrophe.¹⁹¹ People were also educated by the government that speculations and black markets were harmful. The 1962 survey records people's comments on speculators. "They made teenagers learn something bad. And they ruined normal people's access towards industrial commodities, because they bought everything once commodities were shelved."¹⁹² Ms. Niu said, "My mother worked as an accountant. I remembered that she stayed up late one day to record an 'arm' of wristwatches, which were confiscated from speculators. The reason I used the word 'arm' was that my mother wore all the wristwatches on her left arm. The whole arm became shiny. That was also the first time I could see and touch wristwatches closely."¹⁹³ At that moment, Ms. Niu learned that speculation was not allowed by the government. My interviewees usually commented on black markets from the outsider perspective, by saying that they knew that black markets existed but refusing to admit they had anything to do with it. One of the reasons was that commodities in speculations were normally luxuries or more expensive than in stores. More likely was that my informants wanted to appear ordinary, innocent, and law abiding, so they refused to be linked to any illegal things. But they frankly admitted that they participated in grey activities. That shows that the Party successfully conveyed its negative attitude to people.

But sometimes, instead of pursuing austerity and tight command on every aspect of the state economy, the state would give controlled liberty to individuals in the economic sphere and conditionally take advantage of black markets. The high-priced

¹⁹¹ Wuhan shi gongshang guanli ju, *Liangnian lai chengshi jishi maoyi guanli gongzuo jiben zongjie* [Brief conclusion of the management of the free markets in two years], October 22, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0276-0010.

¹⁹² Gongshang guanli ju, *Dangqian shichang shang liangyou ji liangyou fuzhipin ziyou maimai he heishi touji huodong de diaocha* [Survey of free transactions of grains, oil, and their productions, and speculations in black market at present], August 3, 1962, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0277-0012.

¹⁹³ Ms. Niu, interview by author, September 17, 2021.

policy, in the early 1960s, was one of the Party's attempts to recovery the national economy. The Party claimed that this policy was designed to battle speculation. Through selling things with high prices against what speculators sold, the state, ideally, could retrieve capital from speculators. Buyers who had sufficient money could also benefit because they got easy access to what they wanted. But from another perspective, the high-priced policy was the evidence that the government also participated in the competitions in black markets, as Feng writes, which finally increased the prices of goods.¹⁹⁴ And buyers, from the same logic, could also benefit from speculations. This policy implied that the government, acknowledging the advantage of black markets, was not desperate to eliminate black markets as thoroughly as it appeared to be.

In 1961, the government reopened the free market, separated economic activities in the free market from the black market, and claimed that the free market could be used to suppress speculation. As the national economy recovered, the illegal trades and the free markets then took on a different meaning to Mao and the Party. They represented “a shaken faith in socialism and a genuine threat to the continued political power of the Communist Party.”¹⁹⁵ In 1963, the Party proposed an instruction to minimize the scope of the free market and gradually replace it.¹⁹⁶ It switched to the viewpoint that the free market stimulated speculation and disturbed the order of the state economy, therefore the government should strengthen strict management over the free market and gradually reduce the number of bazaars. Ultimately the Wuhan government closed the grain and oil bazaar and vegetable bazaar in the urban area between 1964 and 1965. But the government's discussion about black markets in documents never ceased and the battle against speculation lasted till the end of the planned economic system. Feng writes that black markets were always in the grey area. Although the government attempted to crack down on speculation in the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, the actions could not last a long time.¹⁹⁷ Agreeing with Feng, I believe that the government also held a lenient

¹⁹⁴ Feng, “Yijiu wuba nian zhi yijiu liusan nian zhonggong ziyou shichang zhengce yanjiu,” 47.

¹⁹⁵ Abrami, “Self-making, Class Struggle and Labor Autarky,” 253.

¹⁹⁶ Gongshang guanli ju, *Guanyu benshi jishi maoyi qingkuang de baogao* [Report of the conditions of free markets in Wuhan], May 18, 1965, WMA, xx000076-ws01-0393-0002.

¹⁹⁷ Feng, “Yijiu wuba nian zhi yijiu liusan nian zhonggong ziyou shichang zhengce yanjiu,” 53.

attitude towards black activities between 1961 and 1965, which was similar to its strategies on dealing with grey activities.

Conclusion

Citizens' attitudes towards illicit activities, not basically consistent with the government attitude, was largely based on citizens' family requirements. Different families, with various incomes, structures, and personal habits, formed personalized expense patterns and desired different commodities and ration coupons. Individuals would naturally adjust and redistribute through multiple methods. People's material desires were so frequently filled by methods that were not even considered illicit by ordinary people. Individuals did not view the methods as "daily resistance," because they utilized the strategies for the purpose of personal survival and never considered to resist or overturn the system. And those strategies, even though were illicit, had the power on social change, strengthened the interaction between urban and rural areas, boosted the economy, and contributed to the planning system and the broader society.

The Party, with its measures and changing attitudes, also admitted the necessity of illicit trading in the improvement of people's living standards and the renovation of the planned economy. The Wuhan government, hence in the early 1960s, reopened the free markets and treated profiteers leniently. The government claimed that its fight with speculation never stopped in the process, and it was supposed to thoroughly prohibit speculation in the black markets after the closure of the bazaars in 1964. But the grey economic activities still existed. The endurance of the grey economy, the long-lasting conflicts about the black economy, and the government's lenient treatments towards them were also shown in the following decade.

Epilogue

The three bitter years from 1959 to 1961 were a symbol of difficulty for my interviewees, a time when they led an ascetic life without ample food and basic groceries. The downturn of the economy of the whole country and the diminished production in the planned economic system accompanied the decline of ordinary citizens' living standards. No individual could be an exception when the torrent of catastrophe swept through. Between 1961 and 1964, the Party carried out multiple temporary measures to rescue the planned economic system and people's daily lives. My informants' general impression of their lives between 1961 and 1965 was miserable, which was identical to the three bitter years. Contradicting personal memories, government statistics show that people's living standard gradually improved, especially after 1963. One explanation of the inconsistency is that people's memories about time are vague. But the government's complex temporary measures and changing standards of consumerism and thriftiness even complicated people's understanding and impression of the economic system and their own lives in the 1960s.

In the early 1960s, the Party still intended to control and plan everything including individual private thoughts and consuming desires. Politicians celebrated model families as examples in propaganda to urge citizens to design a budget, cut spending, and reduce debt under the principle of frugality. They were supposed to budget and improve their lives within the Party-state's expectation. But the blueprint was not successfully carried out in everyday lives. My interviewees, although they claimed that they lived an ascetic life, curbed their desires, and cut out unnecessary expenses, in practice used alternative explanations to fit their consumptions into the guideline of thriftiness. My interviewees chose to pay for entertainment, such as watching movies and listening to operas, and luxuries, including eating in high-priced restaurants, to alleviate their tough lives' pressure.

My interviewees believed and expressed that they lived frugally between 1961 and 1965. Their behaviour, however, contradicted their general miserable impression about the 1960s. What they considered during the purchasing was their family needs and

personal desires rather than the Party's aspiration. It was not surprising that people did not follow the Party's propaganda, when the government itself held a conflicting attitude towards consumerism and thriftiness. The government's temporary economic adjustment measure to accumulate capital through encouraging people to buy items at high prices even fueled the tension. People then took advantage of the Party's complicated attitudes and expanded their own material desires. The developing desires required personal coping strategies to raise sufficient money and get access to goods.

People chose to deposit money in a drawer at home, instead of saving in the "monobank," because of the convenience of withdrawing and spending money, neglecting the Party's invocation of saving in the bank and contributing to the nation. When the money that families possessed could not cover their consumption, citizens turned to borrow from the ROSCA. These private and unofficial organizations made it possible for individuals to buy luxuries, which the government and the bank could not manage to do. Besides the borrowing strategies, citizens figured out more methods to earn money and buy commodities. They privately exchanged their spare things, bought foods from unlicensed peddlers, and sometimes bought scarce commodities from speculators in black markets. The Party knew the existence of all the illicit economic activities. Considering that these activities contributed to individual living improvement in the early 1960s, the Party held a conditional lenient attitude towards different illicit activities. The scope of the tolerance was based on the level of threat of each economic activity towards the planned economic system.

For individuals, the policies in the planned economic system were designed for the whole country, overlooking the personalisation and particularity of various families, so that citizens adopted household financial strategies to self-regulate and accommodate themselves to the planned economy. These coping strategies were unexpected by the government planners, and some were even illicit. They helped the individuals survive, increased the sense of community among extended families and neighbours during mutual aid, and even encouraged consumerism against asceticism. Different from Karl Gerth's argument that consumerism negated the communist revolution, I believe that household consuming and financial coping strategies made up for what policies could not

cover. Rather than considering those individual illicit behaviours as “daily resistance” towards the planning system and the Party, I view them as citizens’ methods to protect personal interests and support the state.

Those strategies improved the material lives of new generation employees like my informants who were the cornerstone of building socialism, boosting the economy, and industrializing. Illicit trading facilitated the exchange of information, material, and capital between urban and rural areas, building a channel of circulation and communication between city and countryside. The trading reallocated goods between urban and rural areas, which was important for people to survive the three bitter years and afterwards when the planning system led to an unreasonable resource distribution in different industries and different areas. In all, individual behaviours, even illicit ones, actually allowed for the smooth functioning of the planned economy and maintaining the stability of the Party-state.

The illicit individual behaviours and their effect on the state and planning system are applicable to a broader circumstance. The family economic coping strategies in my research were not isolated and were intertwined with different dimensions of life and society. Recreational expenses, for instance, were also related to the cultural industry and physical and mental health. The strategies of spending money on recreation were more than family budget and economy, but also relevant to the development of culture, art, and hygiene. Expanding my argument further, the illicit strategies were not limited to economic activities, such as private lending and illicit trading in markets, but also involved recreation, spirituality, politics, socializing, art, education, gender, and every dimension relating to daily life. Thus, I believe that illicit individual behaviours contributed to the development of the state and played a role in social change.

The government gradually abolished the temporary measures after 1963. Mao and the Party soon saw this accommodation of “capitalistic” economic activities as an evidence of capitalist restoration, which prompted his renewed emphasis on class struggle. The Party launched attacks on free markets and capitalists in the Four Cleanups, then leading to the Cultural Revolution. My stories focus on the early 1960s. But

individual strategies had longer-lasting effects on the economic system. The government continued to accommodate these strategies in the 1970s. The illicit trading would not disappear when the free market was closed.¹⁹⁸ The consumerism and the government's lenient attitude towards consumption, to some degree, paved the way for economic reforms in the post-Mao era.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Jin Dalu and Karl Gerth say enough about economics and consumption during the Cultural Revolution, showing that the practices of the 1960s extended into the decade that followed. Jin Dalu, *Feichang yu zhengchang: Shanghai wenge shiqi de shehui shenghuo* [Abnormal and normal: Social life in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution] (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2011); Gerth, *Unending Capitalism*.

¹⁹⁹ This statement is suggested in Feng Xiaocai's and Laurence Coderre's work. Laurence Coderre, *Newborn Socialist Things: Materiality in Maoist China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Feng, "Yijiu wuba nian zhi yijiu liusan nian zhonggong ziyou shichang zhengce yanjiu."

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