

The Shaping of Urban Cultural Memories Through Informal Employment: A Case Study of Dongguan, Guangdong, China

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Abstract

This paper takes Dongguan city, Guangdong Province, China, as a case study to explore how informal employment participates in shaping urban cultural memory. Combining desk research, secondary literature, and fieldwork interviews, this study introduces a triple theoretical perspective: applying a threefold theoretical perspective: functional linkage theory to frame the concept of informal employment; Lefebvre's "space production" theory to analyze how labor practices shape urban space; and Halbwach's "collective memory", which explains how daily labor is transformed into shared cultural memory; and analyses several cases. The study revealed that informal employment in Dongguan shapes the collective memory of the city as a cultural force through repetitive practice, spatial embedding and group interaction. However, urban renewal and governance have challenged the continuation of these memories, resulting in the dissolution and burial of some memories. The conclusion of this paper points out that informal employment should be understood not only as an economic phenomenon but also as an integral part of urbanization and identity construction, offering a renewed perspective on the link between informal employment and urban development.

Keywords

informal employment, cultural memory, Dongguan city, factory, workers

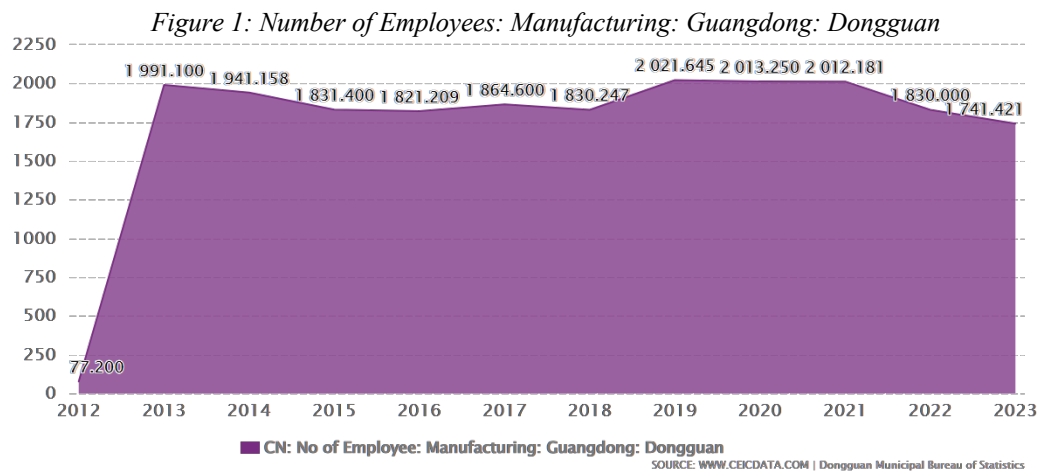
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In the past forty years, China has experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization. Dongguan, Guangdong, a typical manufacturing city, has important research significance. In the city's collective memory, the Taiping handbag factory in Humen marked the beginning of China's "Three Supplies and One Compensation" model. In the following ten years, hundreds of similar enterprises sprung up, which promoted Dongguan to the "world factory" stage and paved the way for the rise of the manufacturing industry in the Pearl River Delta, making it an important base for global manufacturing. This also led to a massive inflow of migrant workers, embedding informal employment into Dongguan's development.

Behind this rapid development, informal employment has become an important hidden mechanism to support Dongguan's industrialization. Owing to the limitations of the early household registration system, the imperfect social security system, and the long-term demand for flexible employment in the manufacturing production chain, many migrant workers participate in production work in the form of temporary workers,

worker workers, dispatch workers, etc. According to statistics and the “2020 China Census Sub-County Data”, the first financial reporter reported that the proportion of manufacturing employees in Dongguan was as high as 58.08%, close to 60%, by sorting out the proportion of employed people in various industries in 35 key cities (Lin, 2022). As shown in Figure 1, the number of manufacturing employees in Dongguan remains consistently high, highlighting the city’s reliance on industrial labor. These workers not only formed one of the largest labor groups but also reshaped the urban space: factories and dormitories are closely linked, and urban villages have become the key fields of employment and life. These labor practices and spaces have shaped Dongguan's unique urban landscape. Therefore, Dongguan has unique significance in the study of the impact of informal employment on the city.



Source: WWW.CEICDATA.COM | Dongguan Municipal Bureau of Statistics.

1.2 Research Gaps

For both West China and East China, “memory” is a highly popular topic. It can even be said that it has become a landmark phenomenon of our time. Moreover, the interdisciplinary value of cultural memory theory has been constantly explored. While providing a theoretical basis for literary research, media research, cultural research, oral history, etc., it has constantly opened up new research perspectives (Yuan, 2017). Although informal employment has been widely discussed by scholars in terms of economic significance and governance challenges, its cultural dimension remains underexplored.

The existing research on China’s informal employment has focused mainly on the following aspects: economy and governance; social inequality; and group differences. Some studies also involve spatial dimensions, such as employment in urban villages and urban–rural fringes, including the hot topic in recent years—new informal employment groups. However, there is little research on the cultural value of informal employment, and the connection with urban cultural memory is relatively unknown. Research on urban memory in China tends to focus on historical buildings, heritage protection or spatial carriers, with few links to labor practitioners. The purpose of this study is to fill this gap and explore whether informal employment involves not only economic adaptation but also the shaping of urban culture and memory.

International research has accumulated a certain amount in the history of labor and the memory of the working class, such as Rogaly and Qureshi (2017), and the moral geography of workers in the food industry has been discussed, involving the interweaving of identity, daily practice, space and memory. However, most of these studies focus on a group of workers in a specific context, and a systematic discussion of the relationship between cultural memory is still lacking. Therefore, in both China and the international field, “how informal employment shapes urban cultural memory” is still a research gap, which provides an academic entry point for this paper.

1.3 Research Objectives and Issues

The main objectives of this study include the following:

- 1) To trace the industrialization of informal employment in Dongguan and reveal its interaction with the manufacturing industry.
- 2) The labor practices and life narratives of informal employment groups in the factory field are analyzed, and how their experiences are externalized and transformed into collective memory is examined.
- 3) From the perspective of cultural memory and space production, this paper discusses how informal employment leaves traces in specific historical moments and spatial carriers and how it shapes Dongguan's urban identity.

On the basis of the above objectives, this paper intends to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How does informal employment interact with the manufacturing industry in the process of urbanization in Dongguan?
- 2) Does the informal employment group in the factory field shape urban cultural memory through labor practices and social experience?
- 3) Can this research perspective be extended to other cities or provide direction for subsequent in-depth research?

1.4 Research Methods

On the basis of the comprehensive analysis of multiple data points, this paper constructs a conceptual framework of informal employment, spatial practice and cultural memory across a timeline of cases. Desktop research is the main method. The main method is desk research, which draws on census data, statistics, policy documents, academic studies, and media reports. In addition to academic works, it also refers to a number of documentary and literary works written from the first perspective of migrant workers or with factory workers as the main body to supplement the perspective of workers and detailed life narratives that are difficult to present in official data and academic research.

At the same time, the study further incorporates limited fieldwork and first-hand interviews, capturing the oral histories of older workers to enrich the temporal dimension and deepen analysis. The approach emphasizes theoretical interpretation and narrative, supported by qualitative validation from field and textual evidence. It aims to provide a new direction for this phenomenon, which is often classified as an economic or governance problem, from the perspective of humanities and sociology.

1.5 Analysis Position

This article adheres to the position of critical neutrality. Informal employment is neither romanticized as grassroots resilience nor stigmatized as a “dirty” problem. Instead, it is understood as a systemic feature of urbanization: it is not only a phenomenon caused by industrial expansion and population mobility but also accompanied by problems such as a lack of labor security and spatial conflict.

More importantly, this paper examines informal employment at the level of cultural value. Even if this form of employment may be governed, banned or transformed in the future, it still exists deeply in the collective memory of countless participants and leaves traces in past space carriers. This fact of “existence” is itself a part of cultural heritage, carried forward through intergenerational memory as a key element of collective identity and cultural memory. We need to address them, look at this cultural significance objectively, and place it in a longer vision and a broader social context for in-depth understanding.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Global Perspective of Informal Employment and the Context of Chinese Factories

The concept of informal employment was first proposed by the International Labour Organisation (1972). The International Labor Organization defined the “informal sector” as follows: “low-income, low-paid, unorganized, unstructured, small-scale production or service units in urban areas of developing countries. Once seen as a “transitory phenomenon” that would be erased by economic development, precarious informal work now threatens to become the modal experience of workers in the Global South and an increasingly prevalent

condition in the Global North (Agarwala, 2009, as cited in Rosaldo et al., 2012). Since then, research has shown that informal employment is both widespread and persistent worldwide.

International organizations and scholars highlight its dual nature: on the one hand, it provides vital livelihoods for women, migrants, and low-income groups. On the other hand, it entails high instability: low wages, weak legal protection, unsafe conditions, and exposure to regulation and market shocks. This contradiction between “important livelihoods and vulnerability” is important for explaining the long-term existence and continuous development of informal employment worldwide.

In the context of China, informal employment also has distinct characteristics. Especially in the factory field, migrant workers who enter the city often lack formal labor contracts and social insurance. Their work depends on order fluctuations, overtime, and temporary outsourcing, placing them in informal employment. Since the reform and opening up, the situation of factory workers has undergone many stages of change: in the 1980s and 1990s, “Three Supplies and One Compensation” and the rise of township enterprises, workers are mostly temporary workers, and workers have piecework and other types of lack protection; from the 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century, the large-scale restructuring of the collective economy promoted the prevalence of outsourcing and dispatching workers. Although the system was perfect, the informal component was still prominent; entering the 21st century, the employment of large enterprises has been standardized, and many SMEs still rely on flexible workers.

2.2 Urban Space and “Space Production”

In the context of industrialization, the factory is not merely a production workshop but also a spatial system that integrates workers’ time, daily routines, and city boundaries. French Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre was the first to develop the theory of the production of space. Lefebvre focused on urban space and argued that “social space is a social product. Finally, he developed a triadic framework to explain this process: (1) spatial practice; (2) representations of space; and (3) representational space (Ye et al., 2011).

Along Lefebvre’s triadic framework of the “production of space,” the factory sites where workers labor can be interpreted from three dimensions. First, spatial practice: shifts, timekeeping, and commuting form repetitive daily routines, with work and life revolving around material spatial carriers such as the “workshop-warehouse-canteen-dormitory/surrounding rental housing,” in which factory workers spend most of their time. Second, representations of space: In the discourse of industrial upgrading and “rectification of inefficient spaces,” factory areas and their extended zones (dormitory districts, surrounding rental areas) are often classified as objects to be renovated and revitalized. Third, representational space: workers imbue particular sites with affective and symbolic meanings, turning them into carriers of memory and identity.

Accordingly, the activities of informal employees do not occur passively in space but actively produce and reshape space in the daily work-life cosite and rhythmic daily life: the distribution at the entrance of the factory, the retail market under the dormitory, and the assembly of retail jobs in the rental house, depositing social relations and labor practices into the material field. Because of this, the unique urban texture of Dongguan has been formed, which does not conform to people’s inherent impressions of high-rise buildings in “big cities”. In Dongguan’s industrial landscape, towns and streets are dotted with clusters of factories whose workplaces and living extensions together form localized core stages.

2.3 Cultural Memory and Workers’ Life

In collective memory, Halbwachs (1992) mentioned that individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory, since each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over-to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu. Memory is not an isolated individual experience but rather a social process that is generated, retelled and confirmed in a group framework. When these memories are stabilized through narratives, symbols and practices, they enter the level of “cultural memory” and continue to play a role in cross-generational transmission.

For migrant workers entering factories, dormitories, canteens, workshops and urban villages around factories constitute most of the trajectory of their daily life. The three-point-one-line scene depicts the pace of life of workers and precipitates into a common memory in the word of mouth of fellow townsmen and workers.

Moreover, “working poetry” and “working literature” transform individual experience into a public narrative, making these memories transcend personal meaning, circulate at a broader social level, and encourage readers to resonate with informal employees with this work experience, forming a collective memory of workers in the factory context.

2.4 Overall Analytical Framework

The analytical framework consists of three levels: first, informal employment is deeply embedded in economic growth, industrial organization and labor mobility, which is an unavoidable part of the urbanization process; second, the activity area of factory workers and its extended space are regarded as the core field for observing informal employment; and finally, from a cultural perspective, it emphasizes how workers' labor experience precipitates into a shared collective memory and transforms into a part of urban memory. The core of this triple perspective is to enrich the understanding of the city from a multidimensional perspective and to have multiple meanings in terms of economy, space and culture. More fields at the level of informal employment should be expanded to conduct cross-research and seek more inspiration and discovery.

3. A Case Study: Informal Employment and Urban Cultural Memories in Dongguan

To better understand how this phenomenon is “spatialized” and “memorized” in Dongguan, this paper selects several representative cases for analysis. These cases cover different historical stages and backgrounds and different narrative methods, including not only the starting point of the factory wave in the early stage of reform and opening up but also the evolution of village-run enterprises and the collective economy in the middle stage and the expression of memory through literature and art from the perspective of contemporary workers. Through the combination of these cases, we can observe how informal employment changes from the level of system and space and how to leave a deep imprint on the cultural level, revealing the epitome of the interaction between factory workers and cities.

3.1 Humen Taiping Handbag Factory

In September 1978, Dongguan established the first “Three Supplies and One Compensation” enterprise in the country, Dongguan County Taiping handbag Factory, which opened Dongguan's vigorous reform and opening up (Dongguan Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2018). It took the lead in introducing the cooperation mode of foreign suppliers providing raw materials, equipment and samples and domestic suppliers providing factories and labor and rapidly gathered a large number of labor forces under the institutional background at that time. The Taiping handbag factory is not only an important symbol for promoting the industrialization of Dongguan but also paves the way for the formation of the manufacturing chain of informal employment in Dongguan in the later period: it is not only a flexible supplement to capital and local cooperation but also a prerequisite for the rapid expansion of the factory.

3.1.1 Spatial Levels

The production of the Taiping handbag factory is not limited to the workshop assembly line; it also shapes the living space associated with the factory. At the beginning of the factory, the Taiping handbag factory has no independent factory and can only temporarily rent the original Taiping bamboo factory as a production workshop. In the early stage of the development of incoming material processing, the warehouse, three halls (ancestral hall, auditorium, canteen), offices and even residential buildings were used to make factories because of their ugliness. After accumulating funds, standardized factories were built and gradually formed a piece of industrial area (Dongguan Municipal Archives, 2019). These records clearly indicate that the workplace of the early factory was unstable and affected by fluctuations in capital, the market and so on. The scope of the field is also more flexible: ancestral halls, auditoriums, canteens, warehouses and residential buildings may be temporarily transformed into production workshops. This spatial utilization mode of 'adjusting measures to local conditions' reflects the closely intertwined state of factory space and urban space.

3.1.2 Memory Formation

At the level of cultural memory, the Taiping handbag factory was incorporated into local history, with a special exhibition in Humen marking its role at the forefront of reform and opening-up. As shown in Figure 2, the Taiping handbag Factory Museum reconstructed the original assembly line, allowing visitors to experience

the working environment of that era. This symbol has been repeatedly cited in government reports and media campaigns as part of the city's brand. Workers' accounts of the "rhythm of the assembly line" and "overtime work" have circulated to this day. According to the Taiping handbag Factory Exhibition Hall, work summaries by employees Zhang Ling and Su Haoran directly recorded the intensity of early work rhythms. They wrote, "The leader assigned us to pack finished products. Packaging, the final process, was very busy—we often worked until two or three in the morning but always met deadlines.", "We often worked night shifts; when tasks were tight, we worked overnight...", "Shipments had no fixed time. Once a call came from Hong Kong, even at midnight, we rushed to the factory to ensure timely delivery" (Song & Ye, 2024). These worker narratives, layered with official memory, make the Taiping handbag Factory not only an economic node but also a lasting part of Dongguan's urban identity.

Figure 2: Taiping handbag factory museum, workshop display and visitor interaction



Source: i-Dongguan (2019)/"Rediscover Humen/Taiping Handbag Factory Exhibition Hall".

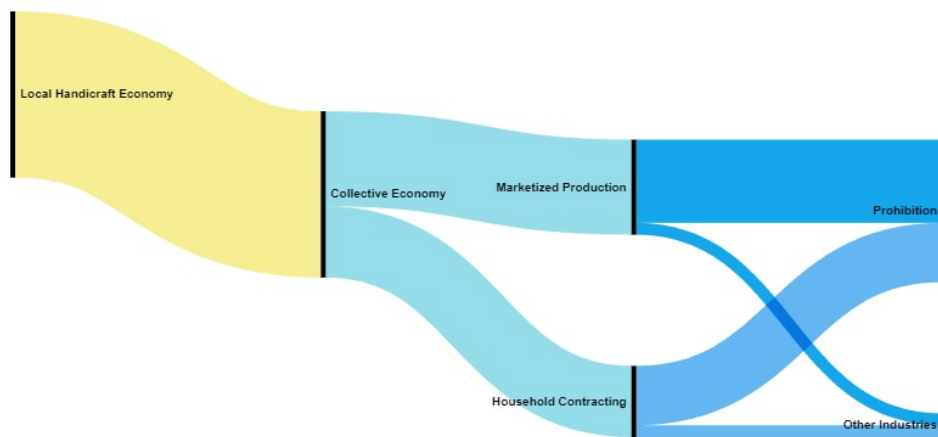
3.2 Fireworks and Firecrackers Factory in Wanjiang

The fireworks industry in Wanjiang and Guancheng has a long history, which can be traced back to manual tradition hundreds of years ago. During the coronation ceremony of the British Queen, master Chen Lancheng was invited to London to stage Dongguan fireworks displays. Since then, Chen Lancheng has been known as the "King of Firecrackers" (Dongguan Municipal Archives, 2012). He was later recorded at the Lingnan Financial Museum in Guangzhou. This episode not only highlights the craftsmanship of the Dongguan fireworks but also leaves a unique cultural memory for the city.

As shown in Figure 3, fireworks production has evolved into four stages: the early stage is the individual handicraft economic stage of local villagers, with production mainly in red-brick houses or small factories; in the middle period, under the collective economic model, a larger-scale organized production was realized, the village collectives unified the distribution of processes and wages and gradually absorbed some migrant workers; in the later period, privatization development, family contracting and marketization were parallel, and production and circulation were more flexible; in recent years, with the strengthening of safety supervision, the production of fireworks and firecrackers has been gradually banned in Dongguan, and the industry has declined.

Against the background of the adjustment of the employment structure, China's employment model has experienced "informalization - formalization - informalization" (Hu, 2012). Throughout this development trajectory, the rise and fall of the Wanjiang Fireworks factory reflected not only the evolution of local industrial forms but also the evolution of the overall trend of China's employment model and revealed that informal employment was embedded in factories and communities in different ways during different periods.

Figure 3: Evolution of the Wanjiang Fireworks Industry in Dongguan

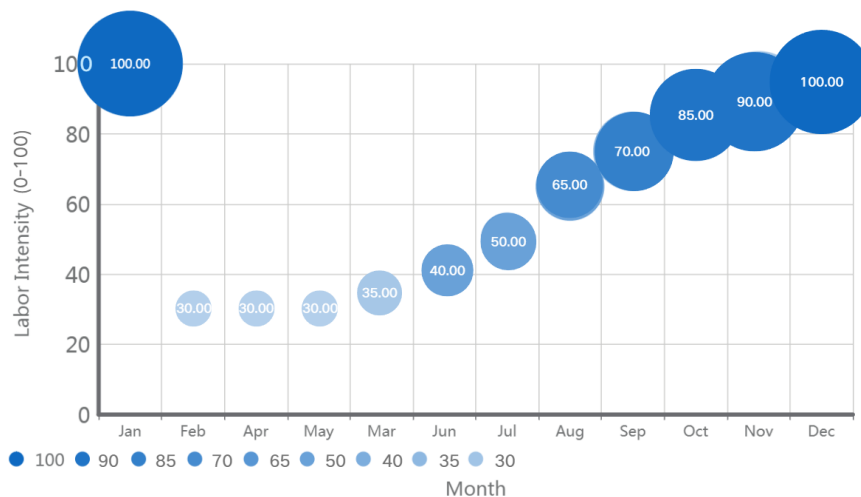


Source: Based on oral history interviews with former workers (2025 fieldwork) and local records of Dongguan's fireworks industry (e.g., Liang, 2003; Dongguan Local Gazetteers, 2010).

3.2.1 Space and Work Rhythm

Compared with modern assembly lines, the spatial layout of fireworks factories retains strong artisanal characteristics. Oral accounts describe production mostly scattered across red brick houses. Larger houses of approximately 100 m² were divided into small rooms, whereas smaller ones had only 20 m². The corridors were narrow and dim, with almost no windows. High-risk gunpowder work had to be isolated from safer processes, with physical separation between rooms. "At that time, they all worked separately in red brick houses... Dangerous ones must be separated from each other and safely separated," one interviewee recalled. Some semifinished products were taken home for further work and then returned to the factory, extending production into households and blurring the line between "factory" and "home." As shown in Figure 4, workers' recollections indicate that labor intensity varied across different months. The rhythm is affected by the order demand and obeys the safe boundary.

Figure 4: Seasonal Labor Rhythm in Wanjiang Fireworks Factory
Seasonal Labor Rhythm in Wanjiang Fireworks Factory



Source: Primary oral history interviews conducted with former workers of the Wanjiang Fireworks Factory (2025).

3.2.2 Cultural Memory Level

The Wanjiang Fireworks Factory was not only vital to the local economy but also integral to Dongguan's urban memory. Locals often link the elderly in Dongguan with being "rental landlords," yet the earliest factory workers were these very villagers. From family workshops to the collective economy era, they were paid through village collectives, directly participating in early industrialization and showing the village's dual role as both producer and distributor. Many older workers recall this model as "working together, supported by the

collective,” a memory that shaped worker solidarity and legacy. In the memory of elderly individuals, after the fireworks explosion was banned from production in the area, many workers turned to woolen weaving, electronics and other industries, and some were transferred to Zengcheng and other places to continue production. Therefore, in the collective and individual narratives, the fireworks factory not only represents a history of maintaining livelihoods through manual labor but also becomes a witness to the end of the industry and the turning point of the times.

3.3 Modern Working Experience and Literary Memory

In the 21st century, Dongguan’s manufacturing industry absorbed large numbers of young migrant workers. Assembly lines and dormitories define their world: bunk beds in crowded rooms, dark corridors, and repetitive trips between the canteen, dorm, and life are highly stylized. Mo Huajie’s *In the Dust of the World* meticulously depicts such spaces, recording the details of more than a decade of his working life in the book (Mo, 2022). In his language, he can perceive the hardship of making a living in the factory and highlights the closure and isolation brought by informal employment. After shifts, exhausted workers returned to dorms, where brief chats in corridors became rare “free moments.”

More importantly, these individual experiences are not limited to personal memories but are constantly recorded, circulated and amplified through literature and dictation. Mo presented factory life in novel form, allowing the public to see workers’ perspectives and resonating with similar experiences. At the same time, groups of working poets, such as creators such as Zheng Xiaoqiong, also transform the details and mental state of the assembly line into representative worker writing through poetry, prose and online texts (Zheng, 2012). These texts make the voices of workers penetrate dormitory and factory buildings, enter the public’s vision, and form a cultural symbol shared by the group. Unlike the communal memory of early fireworks factories, modern factory memory is more isolated and often framed as “wandering” or “strangers.”

3.4 Comparative Case - “Sanhe Gods”

A group of young informal laborers who gathered around the “Sanhe Talent Market” in Shenzhen came to be known as the “Sanhe Gods,” representing a way of survival radically different from factory life. The NHK documentary *Sanhe Talent Market: Young People in China Earning ¥1500 a Day* focused on their lifestyle of “working for one day, then playing for three,” drifting between internet cafe rentals and cheap rentals. These “fallen” youths were mockingly referred to as the “Sanhe Gods.” The term “Sanhe” derives from the “Sanhe Talent Market,” where they sought day-labor jobs as their main source of income (The Beijing News, 2020). Media and scholars note that they were mostly rural youth from left-behind families, rejecting factory discipline for day jobs and “Buddha-like drifting,” forming a marginalized subculture. This highlights another path of informal work: avoiding factories and production systems, surviving instead in “derailed” marginal spaces.

This cultural symbol stands in sharp contrast to the memory of factory workers in Dongguan. Both Shenzhen and Dongguan are cities with a high share of manufacturing, strong dependence on industry, and predominantly young resident populations. They also share features such as a low proportion of registered household residents and high population density, all of which provide fertile ground for the growth of informal employment. In Dongguan, informal work also lacks stability but remains embedded in factories and communities, evolving with the city. Workers’ identities and labor experiences are transmitted through local memory. In contrast, the “Sanhe Gods” embody a more drifting and negative narrative, detached from urban transformation and instead isolating themselves. Their marginal status outside the factory became a social label. The former represents labor memory under Dongguan’s industrialization, whereas the latter reflects a selective withdrawal born of disillusionment.

3.5 “Dongguan East” Musical

The musical *Dongguan East* artistically presents past factory life shaped by informal employment. More research and media reports have noted that, according to incomplete statistics, since the reform and opening up, more than 200 million people have worked, built and struggled in Dongguan (Wu et al., 2024). As shown in Figure 5, the stage scenes of *Dongguan East* vividly reproduce factory assembly lines and railway station

waiting halls, turning scattered personal experiences into a shared public narrative. These details evoke emotions in former migrant workers and educate younger generations unfamiliar with that era.

Figure 5: Stage scene from the musical Dongguan East Railway Station



Source: Nanfang News. (2024, August 15). Musical “Dongguan East Railway Station”: An anthem for ordinary people in the era [Photo of stage performance]. Nanfang News.

As scholars note, artistic translation transforms marginalized labor narratives into public memory, which is perceptible and reproducible on a broader scale. More importantly, “Dongguan East” is not only a stage work; it has symbolic significance in the urban narrative. Local media and the government frame it as a cultural expression of Dongguan’s “world factory,” balancing industrial austerity with workers’ vitality. This combination of officials and art has caused the informal employment experience of factory workers to gradually increase the cultural resources of urban communities.

Research and media reports have noted that, according to incomplete statistics, since the reform and opening up, more than 200 million people have worked, built and struggled in Dongguan (Wu et al., 2024). Because of this enormous scale, the factory experience is not only the memory of minority groups but rather the common cultural background of the whole city, which highlights the wide coverage of workers in Dongguan city and explains why “Dongguan East” can resonate strongly: it is not the marginal experience of a few people but a realistic record of the participation of a large number of workers and engraved in the history of the city. By expressing this ubiquitous factory memory through artistic forms, labor and migration are no longer concealed but become the core parts of Dongguan’s self-identity and cultural writing.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Interaction between Manufacturing and Informal Employment

Dongguan’s experience shows that informal employment is not a residual of the industrialization process but is accompanied by industrialization and manufacturing and has existed for a long period of time. At different stages, various forms of informal employment have been utilized by the market. Although its scale declined after new regulations, the special labor demand of manufacturing ensures its persistence in unstable forms.

Cases show this interaction: expanding orders require flexible labor, and informal workers enter cities and industries through this channel. This relationship is not one-way but mutually conditional. In other words, informal employment has been key to Dongguan’s rapid industrial expansion and competitiveness and remains integral to the city’s growth.

4.2 The Factory Field as a Memory Bearing

This paper emphasizes the “factory field” as not only a production site but also a space carrying social relationships and memory. Factories, dormitories, rental houses and urban villages lock the scope of work and life of workers. It reflects both the linkages of sites and the interactions of their users. Workers gather at gates, seek jobs near dorms, and process piecework in rentals. These daily practices make the factory field the center of their social life. This space matters because it holds both labor and memory. All the objects, displays, and nodes constitute the original flow of labor experience solidified into memory.

4.3 From Labor Experience to Urban Memory: The Tension between Practice and Governance

The labor and life experience of the workers did not disappear at the end of the production line but continued and reproduced in different forms. Oral stories, worker poetry, and novels such as Mo Huajie's *In the Dust of the World* record spread these experiences. The musical *Dongguan East* stages workers' passion as part of the city's spirit. These expressions show that labor experience can be refined into texts and artistic performances to compose urban cultural memories and be used in public narratives.

However, these memories risk being erased. Urban renewal and governance often take urban villages and old factories as the objects of transformation, such as the demolition of dormitories, the disappearance of workshops, and the transformation of factories. The material space originally carrying memories no longer exists, and the memories of many workers also dissipate and disintegrate over time. At the same time, governance selectively repacks certain elements, using factory history and labor stories as emblematic displays of hard work or old-town renovations that are divorced from the facts. Notably, this renarrative erases hardships and processes, reducing them to symbolic "contribution" and reshaping memory.

Therefore, there is tension between informal employment and cultural memory: on the one hand, labor practices constantly generate new memories; on the other hand, governance and renewal may erase or transform these memories. This dynamic factor makes workers' memory both fragile and constantly rewritten.

4.4 Research Boundary and Future Direction

This paper focuses on the selection of manufacturing factories as the analysis object because the factory and its related space have been developed for decades, leaving cultural traces that can be identified and verified. Cultural memory forms through time, intergenerational transmission, and public narratives. In contrast, new informal employment groups, such as takeaway riders, online car-hailing drivers, anchors, etc., are needed. Although large in number, their workplaces are dispersed and mobile, making cultural memory harder to form.

Moreover, such newly defined groups have similar forms in many cities in China, which is not a unique phenomenon in Dongguan. The working environments of takeaway riders in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing and Shanghai are similar. Anchors and e-commerce groups are more representative of cities such as Hangzhou and Yiwu. This does not mean that they cannot enter cultural memory but that memory-making lags behind new platform-based jobs, which is still underexplored. In recent years, there have also been films about takeaways, and their fragmentation has also been recorded via social media. A series of temperature stories are also slowly attracting the public, and these groups will also be fresh participants in the city.

This study focuses on Dongguan's manufacturing industry, which is limited by region and scope. Conditions may differ if applied to other cities. Each city offers unique value and perspective on informal employment culture, with indirect insights: By identifying labor forms (e.g., industry-specific patterns and characteristics) and spatial fields (e.g., clusters, living spaces) tied to local industries, we can analyze how labor practices become group memory and shape urban identity.

5. Conclusion

The findings show that informal employment is closely tied to manufacturing, supporting industrialization and shaping labor experience in specific spaces. Research shows that informal employment is closely related to the development of the local manufacturing industry, which not only supports the industrialization of cities but also shapes labor experience through specific fields. These experiences move beyond individuals, settling through space, objects, and narratives into shared memory. With governance and industrial shifts, informal employment may shrink or vanish in some sectors. This does not erase its cultural value in urban history. In contrast, they should be recorded and expressed through literature, film, and drama. The key is that records should not only be superficial or overauthentic but also try to restore the real situation and complex experience of workers.

Thus, the significance of informal employment extends beyond economics. It is both a product of industrialization and a lens through which to understand labor, migration, and identity. Preserving these memories will enrich the city's honest and layered narrative.

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Conflicts of Interest

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