

Women's Work and the Politics of Homespun in Socialist China, 1949–1980

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SUMMARY: For decades after the socialist revolution, people in rural China continued to wear homespun cloth, and millions of rural women continued to spend a large part of their waking hours producing cloth and clothing. This is puzzling because the state opposed manual cloth production as wasteful of labor and raw materials, and because state monopolies should have ensured that all cotton ended up in the hands of the state and that all rural people were supplied with rationed machine-made cloth. This article looks at the reasons for the long survival of handloom cloth. These include the ways in which manual cloth production was integrated with rural gender norms and with a gift economy that prescribed the exchange of cloth at major life cycle events, and the existence of interlocking scarcities (of grain, cash, cotton, and cloth) that forced rural people to sell their cloth rations and make their own cloth from whatever cotton they could scrape together.

The image of rural women hunched over spinning wheels and looms does not figure prominently in the historiography of socialist China. Chao Kang's study of the Chinese cotton industry assumes that manual textile production was phased out in the early 1950s, and other works in English and Chinese concur.¹ Yet interviews and archival sources show that *tubu* (homespun cloth) remained the standard garb for many rural people until the very end of the collective period, and that for an entire generation, millions of rural women continued to spend large portions of their waking hours at the spinning wheel or the loom, usually after a full day of collective labor in the fields.

This is perplexing for two reasons: firstly, official discourses in the PRC did not afford legitimacy to the labor of making cloth and clothing; to the

1. Chao Kang, *The Development of Cotton Textile Production in China* (Cambridge, MA, 1977); Wang Haibo, *Xin Zhongguo gongye jingji shi, 1949: 10–1957* [History of the Industrial Economy of New China, October 1949 to 1957] (Beijing, 1994), p. 386; Linda Grove, *A Chinese Economic Revolution: Rural Entrepreneurship in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD, 2006).

extent that such work was perceived at all, it was treated as an insignificant household chore, tainted by its association with a backward peasant economy and a feudal gender system that locked up women in the household. Secondly, CCP leaders sought to curtail household textile work because it tied up two resources that were needed for the construction of the socialist economy: cotton – China’s most important cash crop and a major source of government revenue – and women’s labor, which was seen as a key ingredient in the economic modernization of the country.

It is easy for us, who no longer observe manual textile work on a daily basis, to forget how enormously labor-intensive spinning and weaving is. In Mao-era north China, it took about sixty labor days a year to provide a family of five with the absolute minimum of clothing. If the family was to be clothed decently according to the modest standards of the times – a good suit for the household head to wear on market days, a new suit of clothes for children every year – a woman had to spend one-third to one-half of her waking hours at the spinning wheel and the loom. Continued manual textile work thus put rural women in conflict with a state that needed women’s labor and was, after 1956, in a position to enforce their full participation in collective agricultural work.

In theory at least, rural people had neither the means nor the need to produce their own clothing. The introduction of unified purchase and marketing [*tonggou tongxiao*] in 1954 put an end to private trade in cotton, cotton yarn, and cotton cloth, and the collectivization of agriculture in 1955–1956 ensured that almost the entire cotton harvest ended up in the hands of the state.² At the same time, a centralized rationing system gave rural and urban people access to modest quantities of state-produced cloth at relatively low prices. Why, then, did rural women continue to engage in time-consuming and back-breaking textile work, in the teeth of state attempts to suppress it? And why did a government that had in earlier years not hesitated to attack traditional gender norms and alter entrenched divisions of labor fail to liberate women from the spinning wheel and the loom?

A first step towards answering these questions lies in unraveling the complex system of interlocking, bureaucratically administered shortages – of grain, cash, cotton, cloth, and labor time – that governed households’ strategies in the collective period. As I will show below, the issue was not simply that state-supplied factory cloth fell short of needs; it was that shortages of cash and grain forced rural households to sell their ration coupons and weave cloth from whatever scraps of cotton they could obtain. This made sense to them because at a time of pervasive shortages, women’s labor was the one resource that remained elastic: men expected,

2. Similar regulations were later put into place for silk, wool, and other textile fibers. Throughout the collective years, more than 90 per cent of all Chinese textiles were made from cotton.

and women accepted, that women could always “work an extra shift” [*jia ban*], carrying out textile work late at night, after men and children had gone to bed. Looked at in this way, handloom weaving survived despite the enormous social cost of having millions of women spend countless hours on a task that could have been mechanized, simply because these costs could be offloaded onto the most powerless group in Chinese society: rural women.

A second factor in the survival of manual textile work, and the one I am going to focus on in this article, was that such work was embedded in complex patterns of social reproduction. Without wanting to idealize the harsh labor regime of pre-1949 rural China, I would argue that textile work in rural China was as much concerned with the making of properly gendered persons as with the making of textiles.³ The rural Chinese woman at her loom reproduced herself and others: her labor shaped her body, taught her embodied skills, and inculcated gendered norms and habits. The products of her labor created men and women as specific sorts of persons, as textiles generally do.⁴

Cloth and clothes created social relationships: local customs in many parts of China dictated that no daughter could marry out in style without a trousseau of clothes; no family could find a bride for their son without giving cloth or cotton to her parents; no newborn child could be welcomed into the community without an exchange of textiles; and no person could leave this world in proper fashion without at least one set of grave clothes. The reproduction of a social and moral order was not external to textile work; it was part of what such work was meant to do. Modern Chinese states did not recognize ritual and social needs; they did not even have a language to discuss them, apart from the highly charged, condemnatory terms of “waste” and “feudal superstition”. Village leaders could and did distribute small amounts of cloth or cotton to expectant mothers and betrothed couples, so that birth and weddings could go ahead as planned, but by and large the state failed to come to terms with the fact that cloth (as, in a different way, food) was a means of social, rather than just physiological, reproduction.

Yet for the state, too, larger issues were at stake. Chinese reformers since the late nineteenth century had argued that the nation's weakness stemmed from its economic fragmentation. The main thrust of economic

3. In fact, I would argue that *all* work in *all* societies is as much about the making of humans and human relationships as it is about making things. In this, I follow David Graeber's argument that “while any society has to produce food, clothing, shelter, and so forth, in most societies, the production of such things [...] is best seen as a subordinate moment in larger productive processes aimed at the fashioning of humans”; David Graeber, *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire* (Oakland, CA, 2007), pp. 96–97.

4. Jane Schneider and Annette B. Weiner, “Introduction”, in Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider (eds), *Cloth and the Human Experience* (Washington DC, 1989), pp. 1–29.

nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century was anti-imperialist, yet economic nationalists were also concerned about the existence of an entrenched “natural” economy, in which self-sufficient peasant households met their needs locally, without participating in a national market. For China to survive, the Chinese had to learn to consume and produce *socially*, in ways that contributed to the ever-increasing integration of the nation.⁵ The creation of such an integrated national economy was part of the program of the Chinese Communist Party. From the state’s point of view, farmers had a patriotic duty to sell cotton to and buy cloth from state trade agencies; in doing so, they were told, they helped consolidate the worker–peasant alliance that was the foundation of the new state.⁶ State planners, in short, agreed with rural people that the circulation of cloth and cotton had the potential to create communities, but they wanted these communities to be national, not local, in scope.

The remainder of this article proceeds in three steps. The first part will discuss discourses on textiles and women’s work during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). These discourses are relevant to my argument because Qing period thinkers were aware of the social and economic centrality of women’s work in a way that few modern writers are, and because the rejection of the late imperial order by the reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century set the terms in which women’s work was perceived in later years. Next, I will look at the cotton–textile–female labor nexus under the People’s Republic and try to explain why CCP policies did not produce the intended results. Finally, I will zoom in on two counties in north China where I conducted field research, and discuss how women experienced changes in their working lives from the 1940s to the 1980s. In this final section, I will also address the question of how representative my fieldwork observations are for China as a whole.

WOMEN’S WORK IN QING CHINA

A concern with a proper gendered division of labor goes back to the formative periods of Chinese civilization. The Chinese distinction between a female “inner” [*nei*] and a male-dominated “outer” [*wai*] sphere bears some resemblance to the Western opposition between private and public spheres, but the idea that the family and the household stood somehow outside politics would have appeared absurd to Confucian thinkers. As Susan Mann has pointed out, the principle of gender separation was:

[...] invoked to stress that wives and mothers inside the home embody the moral autonomy and authority on which husbands and sons must rely to succeed outside.

5. Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China* (Chicago, IL, 2006).

6. Shaanxi Provincial Archives, doc. 230, # 44, 12 May 1952, doc. 123:4, # 465.

All are part of a family system that constitutes a seamless, unitary social order centered on the home and bounded by the outer reaches of the imperium.⁷

It was the duty of the ruler and of Confucian-educated scholars to ensure that men and women in rural and urban households fulfilled their separate yet complementary tasks. For commoners, these tasks involved the production of food and clothing, the twin necessities that “people cannot go without for even a single day”.⁸ Farming and weaving were often paired rhetorically: men farmed, making sure that everybody had enough to eat; women span and wove, making sure that nobody remained unclothed.

“Women’s work” [*nü gong*] had a prominent but ambiguous place in these discourses. It was understood primarily as textile work; in fact, the character *gong* was often written with the radical for “silk” to denote the specific nature of female work. More than in the case of men, women’s work was believed to be a moral as well as an economic necessity. Work was considered one of the “four womanly virtues,” and work with spindle, loom, and needle exemplified the wisdom, frugality, and industriousness that women were expected to possess.⁹ Yet women’s work had also more problematic connotations: written without the silk radical, the character *gong* assumed the meaning of “craft”; written with yet another homophone, it signified “merit” or “value”. These variations, Francesca Bray suggests, reveal the ambiguity that Confucian moralists felt about women’s work: such work was meritorious as long as it produced use value for state and household; if, on the other hand, it produced private profit, it was potentially disruptive.

From one perspective, textile work was the female equivalent of farming, part of the “fundamental” [*ben*] occupations that the state wanted to strengthen. From another perspective, textile work could be seen as craft and thus as part of the “secondary” [*mo*] pursuits of artisans and merchants.¹⁰ Different types of work occupied different spaces in this spectrum. Sericulture enjoyed special status because the classics paired it with agriculture [*nong sang*] as the basic occupations of the realm. Cotton came to China later and did not have the same canonical status; it was therefore more easily seen as a distraction from “proper” farming.

Late imperial administrators and ideologists envisaged a gendered economy in which “men farmed and women wove” [*nan geng nü zhi*] and in which almost all work took place in the confines of the small producing household. It is safe to say that almost all women in late imperial China,

7. Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, CA, 1997), p. 15.

8. Chao Cuo, “Memorial on the Encouragement of Agriculture”, in Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (eds), *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2 vols (New York, 1999), I, pp. 355–357.

9. Mann, *Precious Records*, p. 143.

10. Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), pp. 184–185, 255–257.

from farmers to palace ladies, performed textile work – “genteel” embroidery in the case of elite women; spinning, weaving, and sewing for most others – and that textile skills formed an important part of women’s identities, a measure of their worth, and sometimes also a source of pride and a means of self-expression.¹¹ The identification of women with textile work was so strong that writers in the Qing period referred to women who did not spin or weave as “having no occupation”, even if they worked in the fields or in handicrafts.¹² Susan Mann provides an example of this rhetoric: Qing official Zhou Kai (1779–1837) commenting on the customs of poor rural people in Xiangyang, Hubei:

I especially pity the women of Xiang. They have no way to develop specialized work of their own and thereby affirm their commitment as faithful wives. [...] Once when I was walking out in the country, I saw some poor women. They were at work breaking up clods of earth with a hoe, and they were even ploughing in pairs (*za gengyu*). This shocked me deeply, for when the *Odes* refer to women in the fields, they speak only of women who bring food to their husbands [...]. I was certain it would not be long before these same wives would be suing their husbands, and husbands their wives. [...] All human beings have “feelings of shame and dislike” [*xiuwu zhi xin*]; can it be that these women’s hearts are inhuman [*shuren*]? Truly the cause of their behavior is that they have no specialized work of their own to do, and they have no commitment to wifely fidelity. As a result, their labor is not sufficient to provide for themselves. All of this is due to the fact that they grow no mulberry.¹³

Actual divisions of labor in the household were more diverse than this rhetoric suggests. Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming estimate that on the eve of the Opium War (1839–1842), almost one-half of rural households wove cotton cloth and that slightly more than one-half of this cloth came on the market.¹⁴ Ramie and hemp, common textile fibers until the early twentieth century, gradually lost ground to cotton; silk, while important economically and culturally, never accounted for more than a few per cent of total textile output.¹⁵ Little is known about regional variations in labor practices. The only region that has been studied in some detail is the

11. Susan Mann, “Work and Household in Chinese Culture: Historical Perspectives”, in Barbara Entwistle and Gail E. Henderson (eds), *Redrawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), pp. 15–32.

12. Bray, *Technology and Gender*, p. 244.

13. Susan Mann, “Household Handicrafts and State Policies in Qing Times”, in Jane Kate Leonard and John R. Watts (eds), *To Achieve Wealth and Security: The Qing Imperial State and the Economy* (Ithaca, NY, 1992), pp. 87–88.

14. Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, *Chinese Capitalism, 1522–1840* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 170–174.

15. Kenneth Pomeranz, “Is there an East Asian Development Path? Long-Term Comparisons, Constraints, and Continuities”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 44 (2001), pp. 322–362.

Lower Yangzi (Jiangnan) region, where weaving for the market was widespread and divisions of labor in the household were relatively pronounced. Even here, the ideal of “men farming and women weaving” was strictly observed only by wealthy families, while poor farmers often adhered to a pattern of “husband and wife working together” [*fu fu bing zuo*]. Kenneth Pomeranz has recently suggested that it was only relatively late that cloistering of women became the norm in most parts of the Chinese heartland.¹⁶

Advanced weaving techniques, and with them patterns of strict gender segregation, spread from Jiangnan to other provinces in the seventeenth to nineteenth century. Initially, textile industries in North China were hampered by the fact that cotton is difficult to spin if the air is dry, but in the 1640s, people in southern Hebei learned to spin cotton in underground cellars, where warmth and humidity could be preserved during the winter spinning season.¹⁷ By the eighteenth century, most northern provinces had become self-sufficient in textiles; in the nineteenth century, this process of “import substitution” spread further to the middle and upper Yangzi regions.¹⁸ The outward spread of improved cultivation and manufacturing techniques intersected in complex ways with changes brought about by growing imports of foreign yarn and cloth since the late nineteenth century.

IMAGINING A NEW NATIONAL ECONOMY

If Ming and Qing officials saw the economy as organized primarily around gender divisions in the ideally self-sufficient household, late nineteenth-century reformers envisaged an economy organized around exchanges between producers and consumers. In this new vision, women's home-based work disappeared from sight. In 1898, the leading reformer Liang Qichao complained that “out of two hundred million women, every one is a consumer, not one is a producer. Because they cannot support themselves but depend on others for their support, men keep them like dogs and horses.”¹⁹ This is an extraordinary statement, understandable only if we

16. *Idem*, “Women's Work and the Economics of Respectability”, in Bryna Godman and Wendy Larson (eds), *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Lanham, MD, 2005); Li Bozhong, “Cong ‘fu fu bing zuo’ dao ‘nan geng nü zhi’” [From “Husband and Wife Work Together” to “Man Plows, Woman Weaves”], *Zhongguo Jingji Shi Yanjiu*, 11:3 (1996), pp. 99–107.

17. Chao, *Development of Cotton Textile Production*, p. 21.

18. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), pp. 242–250.

19. Liang Qichao, “Lun nüxue” [On Women's Education], in Li Youning and Zhang Yufa (eds), *Jindai Zhongguo Nüquan Yundong Shiliao* [Source Materials on the Women's Movement in Modern China] (Taibei, 1975), cited in Rebecca Karl, “‘Slavery’, Citizenship and Gender in

assume that Liang imposed on China a normative, Western-derived model in which productive work takes places in offices and factories, while households serve as places of consumption.

In reality, only a tiny fraction of even the male population worked outside households at that time. Officials, clerks, and professionals earned individual salaries; in a different way, the urban proletariat in the treaty ports (minuscule at the time of Liang's writing) could be said to consist of self-supporting, independent economic agents. However, the vast majority of Chinese worked in household units – farms, shops, family enterprises – that compensated members with a share in a common income stream rather than a wage. Liang's identification of men with productive work and women with consumption would have made no sense to thinkers of an earlier generation, who saw men's and women's work as equally rooted in the household.²⁰

Early twentieth-century debates on women's place in public life centered primarily on women's rights to education and on the ways in which middle-class women could contribute to the modernization of China. Reformers envisaged roles for educated women as teachers in girls' schools, doctors in women's hospitals, and even soldiers in women's battalions. Women's work in clerical positions, as typists and secretaries, was considered problematic because it exposed respectable women to unrelated men who were thought likely to abuse them.²¹ Many commentators recommended domestic textile work as being more compatible with conservative class and gender standards. Wives and daughters of the new urban middle class were advised to engage in sericulture, needlework, and other textile crafts – occupations that allowed them to stay at home and raise their children as future citizens of the nation.²² The men and women who extolled the virtues of revitalized *nü gong* in the Shanghai press did not, however, extend their analysis to the working lives of the

Late Qing China's Global Context", in Peter Zarrow and Rebecca Karl (eds), *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 212–244. Liang revised his claim in his *Xinmin shuo* [*Discourses on the New Citizen*], published between 1902 and 1904, where he conceded that only "six to seven tenths" of women were unproductive and added that unproductive males (traditional literati, bureaucrats, bandits, beggars, etc.) accounted for 40 per cent of the male population.

20. For an intentionally schematic but very instructive discussion of historical shifts in the meaning of work, see Stevan Harrell, "The Changing Meanings of Work in China", in Entwistle and Henderson, *Re-Drawing Boundaries*, pp. 67–78. Shifts in the general understanding of "the economy" and its changing relationship to moral, social, and political realms are discussed in Yeh Wen-hsin, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843–1949* (Berkeley, CA, 2007).

21. Bryna Goodman, "The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory and the New Republic", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 64 (2005), pp. 67–101.

22. Constance Orliski, "The Bourgeois Housewife as Laborer in Late Qing and Early Republican Shanghai", *Nan Nü*, 5 (2003), pp. 43–68.

majority of Chinese women. Household-based textile work by non-elite women was rarely discussed, despite the fact that rural women in most parts of China continued to spin and weave and that new export-oriented industries – silk embroidery, lace-making, knitting etc. – sprang up in many parts of coastal China. What had once been the normal and normatively right type of work for all women was now increasingly considered irrelevant to the social and economic life of the nation.

This view was reinforced by the widespread perception that manual textile industries were collapsing under the onslaught of foreign imports. Recent research suggests, however, that Chinese textile handicrafts held out remarkably well in the face of imports and domestic factory competition. The three-way battle between import cloth, the products of Chinese cotton mills, and *tubu* cloth has been charted in great detail.²³ The story begins in the 1870s, when imports of machine-made yarn and cloth – initially from Manchester, later from Bombay and Osaka – took off. Hand-spinning, which was hopelessly inefficient compared to mechanized spinning, soon declined: already by the turn of the twentieth century, half of all yarn used in China came from factories. The advance of machine yarn slowed after 1900, largely because weavers took to combining machine-spun warp threads (which have greater tensile strength) with homespun weft (which is thicker and warmer than machine yarn). By 1913, the percentage of factory yarn had crept up to a level of about 75 per cent, where it stayed throughout the 1920s and 1930s.²⁴ Hand-spinning survived in cotton-growing areas, where families used the cheap labor of girls and old women to spin for household use. Even some commercial weaving centers continued to use hand-spun yarn: the Dingxian handloom industry, for example, continued to use homespun yarn in combination with machine-spun yarn, despite Dingxian's proximity to Tianjin's cotton mills.²⁵

The impact of factory competition on handloom *weaving* was quite different. In relative terms, handloom cloth declined as factory cloth conquered a larger share of the market. At the same time, a growing

23. Albert Feuerwerker, "Handicraft and Manufactured Cotton Textiles in China, 1871–1910", *Journal of Economic History*, 30 (1970), pp. 338–378; Xu Xinwu and Byung-Kun Min, "The Struggle of the Handicraft Cotton Industry Against Machine Textiles in China", *Modern China*, 14 (1988), pp. 14–39, 35; Richard A. Kraus, "Cotton and Cotton Goods in China, 1918–1936: The Impact of Modernization on the Traditional Sector", Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1968; H.D. Fong [Fang Xianting], *The Growth and Decline of Rural Industrial Enterprise in North China* (Tianjin, 1936); Chao, *Development of Cotton Textile Production*; Philip Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350–1988* (Stanford, CA, 1990).

24. Xu and Min, "Struggle of the Handicraft Cotton Industry", p. 35; Kraus, *Cotton and Cotton Goods*, p. 142, Table VI.I.

25. Zhang Shiwen, *Dingxian nongcun gongye diaocha* (Chengdu, 2001), pp. 65–72, 84. See also Sidney Gamble, *Ting Hsien: A North China Rural Community* (Stanford, CA, 1954), pp. 298–300.

population and rising living standards may have led to increased overall demand, and the availability of cheap factory yarn led to the dispersion of handloom weaving from its old centers in the lower Yangzi and the North China plain to central and western China.²⁶ New commercial weaving districts, specialized in imitation “foreign” cloth, emerged in places with good access to machine-spun yarn, such as Nantong near Shanghai and Gaoyang and Baodi near Tianjin.²⁷ In 1934–1936, handloom cloth still accounted for 70 per cent of China’s cotton textile output.²⁸ In these years, 24 per cent of Chinese rural households span and wove. Unsurprisingly, handloom weaving was most common in provinces where cotton was grown: in Henan, about 60 per cent of rural households produced cloth; in Shaanxi, 50 per cent; in Hebei, Shanxi, and Shandong, about 40 per cent. Handloom weaving was comparatively rare in southern, south-western, and north-eastern China, where little cotton was produced.²⁹

GENDER, TEXTILES, AND COTTON UNDER SOCIALISM

When the Chinese Communist Party came to power, it inherited a number of assumptions from its republican and late imperial predecessors. CCP leaders saw little moral or economic value in household-based textile work; instead, they associated women’s work at the spindle and the loom with backwardness and underdevelopment. Like their predecessors, they assumed that rural handicrafts had been practically wiped out by foreign competition, and would have to be phased out even if they survived.³⁰ *Tubu* cloth in China did not have the association with cultural authenticity that *khadi* had in India.³¹ The fact that China’s handloom industries had held out relatively well in the face of mechanized competition was a cause not for celebration but rather for concern: as long as millions of rural households dressed in handmade cloth, China could not develop a strong cotton industry – which was seen as a necessary first step in a trajectory that started with cotton mills and proceeded to railroads and heavy industries.³²

26. Feuerwerker, “Handicraft and Manufactured Cotton Textiles”, pp. 344–345.

27. Grove, *A Chinese Economic Revolution*; Kathy Le Mons Walker, *Chinese Modernity and the Peasant Path: Semicolonialism in the Northern Yangzi Delta* (Stanford, CA, 1999); Fong, *Growth and Decline of Rural Industrial Enterprise*.

28. Kraus, *Cotton and Cotton Goods*, Table V.II (opposite p. 115).

29. Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao* (Beijing, 1957), III, p. 753. These data are based on (often cursory) reports from 925 counties in 22 provinces.

30. See for example, Mao Zedong, “The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party”, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing, 1967), pp. 305–334.

31. Susan S. Bean: “Gandhi and *Khadi*, the Fabric of Indian Independence”, in Weiner and Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience*, pp. 355–376.

32. See Zanasi, *Saving the Nation*, ch. 2, for a discussion of the misgivings prominent Nationalist leaders had about China’s “small peasant economy”.

Interestingly, CCP leaders had embraced manual textile industries before their victory in the Civil War. From 1941 to 1949, the CCP – then entrenched in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region centered on Yan'an and embroiled in an undeclared civil war with their Nationalist rivals – mobilized tens of thousands of rural women (and many men, including soldiers and party leaders) in a mass spinning movement. Faced with a Nationalist embargo, CCP leaders promoted hand-spinning and hand-weaving as a way to improve rural living standards, raise political awareness among women, and strengthen the economic independence of the border region. In an area that did not have a strong native textile tradition, 150,000 to 200,000 women produced yarn and cloth in private households or loosely knit collectives.³³ After the victory in the Civil War, however, the socialist government discontinued this policy. As a 1949 article explained, the priority now was to develop a modern cotton industry; hand-spinning and hand-weaving were to be phased out in the next two to three years.³⁴

Ideologically, the CCP espoused the Engelsian notion that women's liberation hinged upon their full participation in paid, public work. Chinese law defined work as the right and duty of all citizens capable of work, and rights to political and social inclusion in the new workers' state were tied to participation in productive work. Women who did not participate in such work were considered "household dependents" [*jiashu*] and accused, in both popular and official discourse, of being unproductive "parasites" [*jishengchong*].³⁵ While state policies in the 1950s accepted that "under the present conditions, housework and some domestic handicrafts are socially indispensable types of work", they called for the creation of conditions in which all rural women could fully participate in "primary agricultural work".³⁶ Revolutionary rhetoric depicted women's liberation as a process of stepping out of the darkness and loneliness of the feudal family, into the sunshine of public life and public work.³⁷

33. Luo Qiong, *Shaan-Gan-Ning bianqu minjian fangzhiye* (Yan'an, 1946); Patricia Stranahan, "Labor Heroines of Yan'an", *Modern China*, 9: 2 (1983), pp. 228–254.

34. Zhang Zhong, "Fangzhi yu mianhua", *Renmin Ribao*, 14 April 1949, p. 1.

35. Song Shaopeng, "The State Discourse on Housework and Housewives in the 1950s in China", in Mechthild Leutner (ed.), *Rethinking China in the 1950s* (Berlin, 2007), pp. 49–63.

36. Zhang Yun, "Guanyu dangqian funü gongzuo wenti de baogao" [Report on Current Questions of Women's Work], *Renmin Ribao*, 12 January 1953.

37. This is vividly expressed in the popular "Women's Freedom Song": "The old society is like a bitter well, ten thousand fathoms deep/The common people are pressed to the bottom of the well; women are the lowest rung [...] / Land reform has given us a new life, smashing the iron door of feudalism/In the past, women were locked up in King Yama's Hall, now we break the iron chains/Women have become free persons who can take care of the great affairs of the nation/Liberation cannot be for one half only; fully liberated, we participate in production/Let's weed out the Chiang Kai-shek reactionaries, vanguard and rearguard work together/Let's

“Stepping out of the home” [*zouchu jiamen*] was described as a “democratic right” demanded by the majority of women,³⁸ but internal Women’s Federation documents show that many rural women felt apprehensive about participation in male-dominated farm work and needed to be “educated” about the nobility of collective labor, so that they could overcome their “narrow and selfish” orientations inherited from the old society.³⁹

Like their Nationalist predecessors, the socialist government operated under very tight resource constraints. Chinese cloth consumption was 6.8 square meters per capita, one of the lowest in the world.⁴⁰ Early PRC planners aimed to increase production to about 10 running meters of cloth per capita.⁴¹ However, even this modest target was not reached until the early 1980s: cloth consumption remained below 7 meters in most years until 1978.⁴² The dilemma for the nation was the same as for individual households: land used for cotton could not be used for grain; more warmth and comfort on the skin meant less food in the stomach. An aggravating factor was that China – a longtime net importer of cotton and cotton goods – became a net exporter in the 1950s.⁴³ Cloth exports, mostly to the Soviet Union and south-east Asia, were about 10 per cent of total output in the years between 1956 and 1973; in 1962, when per capita rations had dropped to just 1 meter, China exported 24.5 per cent of its cotton textile output. It was cotton cloth, more than any other commodity, that paid for Soviet technological aid and for the grain imports that saved the urban population from starvation during the 1959–1961 famine.⁴⁴

work hard in production and not be idle; let’s all put in more effort/Let’s build a new China for a million years.”

38. “Wei nongcun funü canjia shengchan kaibi guangkuo de daolu” [Opening a Wide Road for Women’s Participation in Production], *Renmin Ribao*, 11 March 1953; “Zhonghua quanguo minzhu funü lianhehui guanyu dangqian nongcun funü gongzuo de zhishi” [Directive on Rural Women’s Work by the All-China Democratic Women’s Federation], *Renmin Ribao*, 31 July 1954.

39. *Xingping xian minzhu funü lianhehui guanyu fadong funü canjia chunjie shengchan gongzuo zongjie*.

40. A 1929 study by the International Labor Office found that only four countries worldwide consumed less cloth per capita than China; three of these countries were tropical. For estimates on cotton availability, see Kraus, *Cotton and Cotton Goods*, p. 159; Chao, *Development of Cotton Textile Production*, pp. 238–238; and Feuerwerker, “Handicraft and Manufactured Cotton Textiles”, p. 369.

41. Xicaiwei jihuaju [Planning Bureau of the West China Financial Commission], *Guanyu Xibei fangzhiye fazhang yijian* [Proposal for the Development of Textile Industry in the North-West], North-Western Military Commission, 1950, p. 4. Chinese output figures are usually given in running meters. Width for machine made cloth varied from 66 to 82 cm.

42. *Dangdai Zhongguo de fangzhi gongye bianji weiyuanhui, Dangdai Zhongguo de fangzhi gongye* [Textile Industry in Contemporary China] (Beijing, 1984), graphs p. 11, 15; Appendix 3, p. 642.

43. Kraus, *Cotton and Cotton Goods*, p. 52; Chao, *Development of Cotton Textile Production*, p. 242.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 279–283.

Cotton was also central to the state's aim of rapid capital formation. Nicholas Lardy summed up the mechanism:

The sale of homespun yarn and handwoven cotton cloth in rural markets has been and remains legally prohibited [...]. Because its major input was underpriced [...] and its products at least initially probably overpriced, the cotton textile industry has been one of the most profitable branches of industry and the single largest source of state revenues, providing in the late 1970s about 10 percent of state budgetary revenues from all sources.⁴⁵

In fact, cotton procurement prices were set so low and textile retail prices so high that cotton factories built in the early 1950s earned their investment back within the first year of operation.⁴⁶ The cotton sector, in short, fulfilled the tasks assigned to it by state planners: it accumulated capital, subsidized heavy industry, and earned hard currency for needed imports. What it did not do was to improve the material life of the people. Statistically, the average Chinese person had slightly less cloth (and consumed slightly fewer calories) in 1960–1983 than in 1924–1931 – although a more equitable distribution may have ensured that the median person had slightly more clothes to wear in the 1960s than in the 1920s.⁴⁷

The introduction of “unified purchase and marketing” [*tonggou tongxiao*] of cotton and cotton products in 1954 formalized a de facto state monopoly that had been gradually introduced since 1949. All cotton had to be sold to the state; cultivators were only allowed to retain one kilogram of cotton per capita to use for quilt and garment padding. This “self-retained cotton” [*ziliumian*] ration became the main source for manual spinning and weaving under the collectives. Regulations were also issued for the supply of the population with cotton products. All cotton and mixed cotton cloth was to be distributed through state channels. Garments, blankets, and other cotton goods also came under state monopoly; such items as mosquito nets, hats, knitwear, etc. were included in later years. To ensure that people bought only as much cloth as they were entitled to, the state distributed ration coupons which could be redeemed only in the place of issuance. In theory, these coupons could be gifted to friends or relatives but not be sold; in practice, however, they were widely sold on the black market.⁴⁸

Unified purchase and marketing ensured that most cotton ended up in the state's hands, but it did not give the state full control over the cotton harvest. In 1954, the national commodity rate [*shangpinli*] for cotton – the share of the harvest purchased by the state – reached 73 per cent; for most of

45. Nicholas Lardy, *Agriculture in China's Modern Economic Development* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 123–125.

46. Chao, *Development of Cotton Textile Production*, p. 250.

47. Lardy, *Agriculture in China's Modern Economic Development*, p. 158; Chao, *Development of Cotton Textile Production*, pp. 286, 290.

48. Shaanxi Provincial Archives 123:1, # 1259, p. 9.

the collective period, it fluctuated between 85 and 95 per cent.⁴⁹ Yet control was uneven: in 1962, for example, about one-third of the cotton crop of Henan, Tianjin, and Shandong (all of them major production areas) remained in the hands of farmers.⁵⁰ Moreover, a 100 per cent commodity rate only indicates that the state cotton company procured all the cotton that it considered extractable at a reasonable cost. Cotton bolls ripen over a period of several weeks, and at the end of the harvesting season, a cotton field may still contain unopened bolls. By removing the stalks from the field, drying them, and picking them over carefully, farmers could obtain fibers that were of no value to the state. Moreover, we know that each level of the administrative hierarchy concealed part of land under their control, leading to cumulative under-reporting. Vaclav Smil found that the official total of China's farmland was almost 50 per cent lower than the real figure, suggesting that large parts of the harvest were concealed from the state.⁵¹ Cotton, which does not grow well on marginal land, may have been more difficult to conceal than other crops, but it seems safe to assume that the farmers' share of the harvest was larger than the statistics suggest.

In 1965, a conference convened by the national Supply and Marketing Cooperative (SMC) and the Ministry of Trade identified three sources of *tubu*: household weaving on the basis of *ziliujian* rations; collective workshops that obtained reject and low-grade cotton through gray or black channels; and "relief" or "self-reliance" weaving, organized with government help in disaster-stricken areas. Of the 566 million meters of *tubu* cloth produced in these ways, 366 million were sold on the black market, while 200 million were retained for household use.⁵² The rationale for commercial handloom weaving is not difficult to understand: in order to ensure the profitability of its cotton mills, the state set cotton procurement prices low and cotton textile prices high. In this situation, turning cotton into cloth for the black market was vastly more profitable than selling cotton to the state.

Xu Jianqing estimates that cloth made from one kg of cotton earned a profit of 24 yuan, while the same amount of cotton fetched only 2 yuan if sold to the state. Since it took seven to ten days to spin yarn and weave cloth from one kilogram of cotton, a spinner/weaver could earn up to 3.4 yuan per day, a very good rate for that time.⁵³ The scale of rural weaving

49. *Zhongguo mianhua tongji*, pp. 268, 272, 277.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

51. Vaclav Smil, "China's Agricultural Land", *China Quarterly*, 158 (1999), pp. 414–429.

52. Xu Jianqing, "Mianhua tonggou, mianbu tonggou tongxiao zhengce yu shougong mianfangzhiye" [The Policy of Unified Purchase of Cotton and Unified Purchase and Marketing of Cotton Cloth and Handicraft Textile Industries], *Dangdai Zhongguo Shi Yanjiu*, 2 (2010), p. 4.

53. Xu Jianqing, "Tonggou tongxiao zhidu xia nongmin jiating mianfangzhi chengben shouyi tanxi" [A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Peasant Household Spinning and Weaving under the System of Unified Purchase and Marketing], *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu*, 4 (2010), pp. 79–85.

can be seen from a report from Hebei Province, which states that more than 1 million persons in 68 counties produced a total of 33 million meters of *tubu* cloth.⁵⁴ Not even the highest authority in the country, the Party Center, could stop the *tubu* trade: a 1960 "Directive to immediately end the hand-spinning and hand-weaving of cotton" was reissued twice, apparently to no effect.⁵⁵

According to Supply and Marketing Cooperative data, *tubu* cloth accounted for 23 per cent of all cotton cloth produced in China in 1955, and 21 per cent in 1956. In 1964, four years after the ban on hand-spinning and hand-weaving, it still accounted for 12 per cent of total cotton textile output.⁵⁶ The 366 million meters of *tubu* cloth produced in 1964 added 0.75 meters to the yearly cloth supply of the average Chinese person, or 1 whole meter if we include cloth that was produced from substandard or recycled materials – not an insignificant amount, a time when the average cotton cloth supply was 4 meters per capita. Assuming that it takes 1 to 1.5 days to spin and weave one meter of *tubu* cloth, the 1964 output of *tubu* represents 366 to 549 million workdays.

COTTON AND GENDER IN GUANZHONG: A CASE STUDY

The remainder of this article is based on fourteen weeks of fieldwork, carried out in five separate stints between 2005 and 2011. We conducted about 200 interviews with more than 80 villagers, mostly men and women born between 1920 and 1945, in Gedatou village (Zhouzhi county) and Danbei and Zhangli villages (Xingping county).⁵⁷ All three villages are located in the Wei river valley of central Shaanxi, a region also known as Guanzhong, "the land between the passes".⁵⁸ Guanzhong comprises most of the flat and fertile land of the province and is relatively prosperous, at least in contrast to the mountains of southern Shaanxi and the dry loess plateau of the north. However, Shaanxi is a landlocked province far from major urban centers, and few villages in the area have industries or

54. Xu Jianqing, "Zhidu biange yu shougong mianfang zhiye: 1954–1965" [System Transition and Handicraft Cotton Weaving: 1954–1965], *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu*, 4 (2009), pp. 66–75, 73.

55. *Idem*, "Mianhua tonggou, mianbu tonggou tongxia zhengce yu shougong mianfangzhiye" [The Policy of Unified Purchase of Cotton and Unified Purchase and Marketing of Cotton Cloth and the Manual Cotton Textile Industry], *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, 4 (2010), pp. 27–34.

56. *Idem*, "Zhidu biange," pp. 73–75.

57. I speak Chinese but was accompanied by Chinese research assistants who helped me understand the local dialect. I am grateful for the able assistance of Meng Fanhang, Liu Yuewen, Zhang Kai, and Ma Rongrui. We stayed in three different villages (Gedatou village in Zhouzhi county, Danbei and Zhangli villages in Xingping county); in each village, we rented rooms from local farmers.

58. For a detailed study of the Guanzhong region, see Eduard B. Vermeer, *Economic Development in Provincial China: The Central Shaanxi* (Cambridge, 1988).



Figure 1. Map of the Guanzhong region.

sidelines. Average household income in the area is slightly below the national average, and has been so for the past fifty years.⁵⁹

No single village can represent all of China, but I am confident that the places we studied were not outliers in any major way. Discussions with Chinese colleagues who grew up in the countryside or lived there as sent-down youths confirm my belief that these villages were not atypical: I have heard reports of hand-spinning and hand-weaving in the collective era in rural Shandong, Henan, Hebei, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hubei, and Sichuan. I have begun comparative research in other places (Jiajiang and Pixian counties in Sichuan, Dantu county in Jiangsu) and plan to do more interviews and archival research in Shandong, Hebei, and Jiangsu provinces. My hypothesis is that patterns similar to those I found in Guanzhong exist in areas that had an earlier tradition of household weaving, i.e. in the cotton-producing provinces of northern and eastern China (Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Shanxi, Hubei, and Jiangsu) and to a lesser extent in Hubei, Anhui, and Sichuan, but not in southern or north-eastern China, areas that produced little cotton.

Cotton production in Guanzhong dates back to the early Ming dynasty and underwent a major revival in the 1930s, thanks to the linking of Shaanxi to the national railroad network and the promotion of cotton cultivation by the provincial government.⁶⁰ Cotton was potentially very profitable, but also risky and expensive to produce. Farmers rarely put more than one-third of their land under cotton; a common plot size was one to two *mu*, the size of a large garden.⁶¹ Weaving was widespread: it was commonly said that “all families [in Guanzhong] spin and no one sells cotton; all villages weave and no one sells yarn”.⁶² Weaving for distant markets in Gansu and Qinghai was concentrated in Xingping county; neighboring Zhouzhi county participated in this trade and also sold some cloth to mountain villages in the Qinling Range. While not a road to riches, weaving for the market was not as badly paid as is often assumed. Depending on the relative prices of grain, cotton, and cloth, a textile worker in the 1940s could earn enough to sustain herself and one to three other household members. Old people in Xingping maintain that in the years before the Revolution, a diligent weaver could feed a family of four even if she was the only earner in the household.⁶³

59. Per capita rural household income in 2010 was 5,238 yuan in Zhouzhi and 5,768 yuan in Xingping. The national average in 2010 was 5,919 yuan. All data from China Data Online <http://chinadataonline.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/>.

60. Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzou weiyuanhui, *Shaanxi sheng zhi: fangzhi gongyezhishi* [Shaanxi Provincial Gazetteer: Textile Industry] (Xi'an, 1999), pp. 36, 43–47; Vermeer, *Economic Development in Provincial China*, pp. 324–346.

61. Interview Cao Yuqing and Zhao Xijie, Zhouzhi, 17 November 2006.

62. Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzou weiyuanhui, p. 46.

63. Interview Yuan Aiyong, Xingping, 13 August 2010.



Figure 2. Spinning, Zhangli village, Xingping county, 2011. Hand spinning stopped in the late 1970s, but many women kept their spinning wheels which they use to wind yarn on bobbins. Here, a woman demonstrates her spinning skills with cotton she purchased from the market.

Photograph: the author



Figure 3. Weaving, Zhangli village, Xingping county, 2012. Some old women in Zhouzhi and Xingping counties continue to weave, usually bedsheets which they give to their daughters as part of their dowries. Weavers mostly use machine-spun cotton or wool yarn which they buy in nearby market towns.

Photograph: the author

Most girls in Guanzhong learned to spin at age seven and to weave at age ten to fourteen, depending on the type of loom they used. Families that did not need the labor of their daughters in the fields groomed them for marriage by cloistering them soon after they had learned to spin. One woman I interviewed was told to stop visiting friends when she was nine; with the exception of trips to nearby temple fairs, during which she and her sisters watched village operas from behind the closed curtains of an oxcart, she did not leave her parent's home until her wedding day.⁶⁴ Cloistering was not always that strict, but most women I interviewed remembered a childhood spent indoors at the wheel and the loom. This regime was relaxed on the seventh day of the seventh month, when girls and young women came together to pray to "Seventh Sister" (*qi jie*, also known as *qi xian*, the Seventh Immortal) for needle skills. This was an all-female festival in which girls and unmarried women met to sing, dance, and pray; married women were only allowed to watch from behind a screen. The preceding weeks, in which girls met to produce an effigy of Seventh Sister and practice songs and dances, were periods of intense socializing between girls and young women who were usually confined in their homes.⁶⁵

Gail Hershatter has pointed out that norms requiring women to work indoors at all times were so strong that they skewed their memories, making them downplay the extent to which they worked outside the home.⁶⁶ Many of the women I interviewed remembered participating in farm work before the revolution: weeding, picking cotton, in one case even driving carts and plowing fields. However, most of them remembered outdoors work as an (albeit common) exception from a moral norm, and associated it with poverty, danger, and isolation. For a woman, skill in planting crops or handling animals did not bring recognition: her proper work was indoors, and she could earn praise for herself and her family only through domestic work.

Almost all important interactions in rural Guanzhong involved the exchange of textiles. Births, cyclical festivals, and visits to the natal family were occasions for giving textile gifts, and no marriage could be concluded without gifts of cloth and cotton. The customary standard for a bride price in Zhouzhi was "two bundles of cotton and four bolts of cloth" [*liang kun mianhua, si ge bu*]; enough for two padded winter suits and two padded quilts or, if spun into yarn, for ten lined suits of clothes.⁶⁷ During the first few years of her married life, a woman was expected to

64. Interview Du Fengying, Zhouzhi, 27 November 2006.

65. Interview Du Fengying and Guo Xiuzhen, Zhouzhi, 27 November 2006; interview Wang Xiuzhen and Feng Jinlian, Zhouzhi, 4 September 2008.

66. Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley, CA, 2011), ch. 2.

67. A bundle (*kun*) of cotton are 10 *jin* (5 kg).



Figure 4. A half-finished roll of *tubu* cloth, Zhangli village, Xingping county, 2012.
 Photograph: the author

produce gifts for her in-laws; if her marital family allowed it, she would also take textile gifts home to her natal family. Gifts of cloth were also mandatory when children were born. Even the dead had to be clothed, and since they wore their clothes for the length of their afterlife, these had to be of the highest quality.⁶⁸ Preparing grave clothes for oneself and for close relatives was seen as an appropriate and dignified end of a woman's working life. Textile work, in short, shaped all aspects of women's lives, in ways that could be both oppressive and empowering.

Early PRC politics were more concerned with reforming the feudal family than with changing women's work. Freedom of marriage and divorce and the right to resist cruel treatment in the family – these were the slogans that attracted many women to the CCP. Yet from early on, participation in productive work, always understood as work *outside* the household, was portrayed as the final aim of women's liberation. Women I interviewed in Zhouzhi and Xinping remembered little change in daily life and work routines during the first years of the PRC. After collectivization, however,

68. "One puts on grave clothes only once in a lifetime; the cloth therefore needs to be woven extra fine and the cotton should be a bit thicker"; Interview Peng Shu'e, Zhouzhi, 15 September 2008.

women's participation in collective agriculture became the norm. The transition from a situation in which most women worked indoors to one in which they worked in the fields alongside men (though usually in separate teams) was extraordinarily rapid. Women's Federation records from Shaanxi indicate that women's participation in agricultural work tripled from 30–50 labor days in 1955 to 140 days in 1956.⁶⁹ A 1955 report from Zhouzhi shows that the average woman performed only 9.6 days of farm work a year.⁷⁰ Four years later, women's labor participation had risen to the same level as men's.⁷¹

The Great Leap Forward with its large infrastructural campaigns further intensified labor demands, as men and women were mobilized to level farmland and to build roads, reservoirs, and canals. Participation in these projects gave new visibility to women's work, but women who wanted to achieve public recognition needed to outperform men in labor competitions and out-suffer other women in public shows of self-denial. As Kimberley Manning has shown, women activists at that time were often indifferent or even hostile towards aspects of CCP policy that stressed the reproductive role of women – health programs, sanitation, protection from overwork and disease.⁷² In Guanzhong, too, young female activists demonstrated their disregard for the reproductive body and embraced physical suffering as the route to liberation. Not surprisingly, most women refrained from activism and continued to devote their time to reproductive work in the household, even if such work gave them no public recognition.

Next to the large infrastructure projects of the Great Leap Forward, it was cotton cultivation that added most to women's workloads. Cotton is a labor-intensive crop at the best of times; it was especially so in Maoist China, where weeds and caterpillars were removed manually and cotton was picked by hand. Because cotton yields tend to deteriorate after a few years of cultivation, teams had to mobilize more and more labor simply to keep output at constant levels. Traditionally, cotton cultivation in Guanzhong had been men's work, but it became feminized after collectivization. Tens of

69. Gao Xiaoxian, "'The Silver Flower Contest': Rural Women in the 1950s and the Gendered Division of Labour", in Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng (eds), *Translating Feminisms in China* (Oxford, 2007), p. 166.

70. Men of the same age group contributed 150 labor days per year; Zhonggong Zhouzhi xian weiyuanhui, "Guanyu Beijingzhai nongye shengchan hezuoshe diaocha baogao" (18 September 1955) Shaanxi Provincial Archives, Shaanxi sheng nongcun gongzuobu folder, no. 123.4, file 547, p. 45.

71. Zhonggong Zhouzhi xian weiyuanhui, "Zhouzhi nongcun renmin gongshe zhengshe jieshushi jiben qingkuang diaocha" (25 August 1959) Shaanxi Provincial Archives, Shaanxi sheng nongcun gongzuobu folder, no. 123.4, file 718, p. 23.

72. Kimberley E. Manning, "Making a Great Leap Forward? The Politics of Women's Liberation in Maoist China", *Gender & History*, 18 (2006), pp. 574–593, 586–587.

thousands of women participated in so-called “Silver Flower Contests”, competitions to raise cotton output through improved – but often vastly more labor-intensive – cultivation techniques. As Gail Hershatter and Gao Xiaoxian have shown, these campaigns had a transformative effect on female activists, some of whom rose to national prominence.⁷³ However, women who did not aspire to labor model status often experienced these contests as exhausting and badly remunerated production drives.

While women’s participation in the fields increased dramatically, little was done to reduce women’s textile work. In theory, the introduction of rationing in 1954 should have ensured that every person received an adequate supply of factory cloth. Cloth rations differed widely, but rural rations were consistently lower than urban ones, by a ratio of about one to two.⁷⁴ Average rural rations in Guanzhong dropped from around 5 square meters in the early 1950s to less than 1 square meter in the crisis years of 1960 and 1961, and then gradually rose back to about 4 square meters.⁷⁵ Based on interviews, I estimate a yearly *subsistence* minimum of 3 square meters of *tubu* cloth, or 4 square meters of factory cloth (which wears out more quickly). This is enough for one suit of summer clothes, one suit of winter clothes, and a quilt and blanket shared between two, to be replaced every three to five years.⁷⁶ Twice that amount (6 square meters of *tubu* or 8 square meters of factory cloth) would constitute a *social* minimum – the amount needed, according to local standards, by a person who is poor but not destitute. Ration supplies, in other words, were sufficient to keep people covered, but not to keep them decently clothed according to the very frugal standards of the time.

However, rural people in Zhouzhi did not use their rations. All my informants agreed that only village cadres (who were expected to wear “urban” clothing when they attended meetings) and young married couples used factory cloth. Most other people sold their ration coupons on the black market and continued to wear *tubu*. The reason was cash scarcity: high quotas and low state procurement prices for wheat and

73. Gail Hershatter, “The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese Women and the 1950s”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28 (2002), pp. 43–72; *idem*, “Local Meanings of Gender and Work in Rural Shaanxi in the 1950s”, in Entwistle and Henderson, *Re-Drawing Boundaries*, pp. 79–96.

74. Qian Zhiguang *et al.*, *Dangdai Zhongguo de fangzhi gongye* (Beijing, 1984), graph on p. 15 of statistical appendix.

75. Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei, “Guanyu mianbu shixing jihua gongying de zhishi” (26 August 1954) Shaanxi Provincial Archives, Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei folder, no. 123.4, file 1261, p. 83; Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzou weiyuanhui, p. 243.

76. Interview Zhao Xijie and Niu Fengqin, 16 November 2006; Zhao Xuefeng, 9 September 2011. Based on interviews in the Shanghai region, Xu Xinwu arrives at a minimum yearly cloth consumption of 5 square meters. See Xu, *Jiangnan tubu shi* [History of Handloom Cloth in the Jiangnan Region] (Shanghai, 1992), p. 197.

cotton depressed collective incomes and reduced the amount of cash and grain that was distributed to team members. In Zhouzhi, the value of a male labor day was around 0.5 yuan, with substantial variations between teams; women earned about 0.4 yuan a day. Assuming 300 workdays for a man and 250 workdays for a woman, a family with two earners received 250 yuan a year. Since most of this income was retained by the collective to compensate for grain consumption, disposable income was often as low as 50 yuan – barely enough to purchase salt, vinegar, school books, and other necessary items. By making cloth at home, households not only saved the cost of buying ration cloth (between 5 and 15 yuan per person) but also earned an additional 1.2 to 6 yuan from the sale of their coupons.

As mentioned above, the main source for homemade cloth was the “self-retained cotton” [*ziliumian*] ration, set in most teams at one kilogram per person. One kilogram of cotton yields about 4 square meters of *tubu* cloth – more than the absolute minimum. However, only part of the ration could be used for spinning: in an area where few people owned any wool or leather garments, warmth in the winter came from cotton padding. A warm winter suit contained about one kilogram of cotton padding; a large quilt required 1.5–2 kilograms. If we subtract padding as well as losses in spinning, we arrive at a yarn availability of 590 grams, equivalent to 2.5 square meters of cloth – somewhat below the subsistence minimum.

People without additional sources of cotton would have reached the end of the collective period with their clothes not only patched (as indeed most rural people did) but in complete tatters. How, then, did people manage? Part of the answer was pilfering: while farmers I interviewed often maintained that taking cotton from the fields was too dangerous, former team leaders said that the practice was widespread and joked about women “returning from the cotton harvest with big bellies”, because they had stuffed so much cotton wool under their belts and jackets.⁷⁷ Teams hid cotton and sold it on the black market to finance necessary purchases of fertilizer, pesticides, and fuel. Many teams also maintained a social fund to help families defray the costs of marriages and funerals. Young men who were about to marry received 1–2 *kun* (5–10 kilograms) of ginned cotton to help them pay their bride price; some teams also gave 1–2 *jin* (0.5–1 kilograms) of cotton to help families clothe their dead. At year-end meetings, when teams distributed cash and grain income, many teams also gave out “secret” shares of cotton – sometimes as much as one extra kilogram per person.⁷⁸

77. For a discussion of theft and pilfering, see Gao Wangling, “A Study of Chinese Peasant ‘Counter-Action’” in Kimberley E. Manning and Felix Wemheuer (eds), *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine* (Vancouver, 2011), pp. 272–293.

78. Harvest concealment and secret distribution to team members were widespread resistance strategies. See Gao Wangling, “Peasant Counteraction”, and Chen Yizhi, “When Food Became

Another source of cotton was the black market, fed by cotton stocks that collectives concealed from the state. Cash-strapped farmers rarely bought cotton for consumption needs, but in a common pattern, women bought cotton and transformed it into cloth, which they exchanged for more cotton. By doing this repeatedly, they could earn a cash income or accumulate cotton for a dowry. Profits in black-market weaving were relatively high, especially if one made the long trek to the cattle fairs of Dianzhen and Mazhao, where people from the Qinling Mountains sold livestock and forest products and purchased grain and cloth. Several interviewees, including a former chairwoman of the village women's federation, admitted that they sold one or two pieces every year; one old lady even claimed that she sold about ten pieces every year for several consecutive years. Most people, however, said that weaving for the market was too risky, and that in any case they could not withdraw labor from the team to the extent necessary for commercial weaving.⁷⁹

Rural women under the collectives found themselves caught between conflicting demands. On the one hand, state and collective leaders expected them to work in the fields; on the other, husbands, children, and parents-in-law demanded decent clothes. Because of pervasive scarcity, the choice of one option was usually a choice against its alternative: one more hour of work in the field meant one less hour at the loom; more work points earned in agriculture meant fewer winter clothes; tidy clothes and the respect they brought came at the expense of reduced cash and grain income and perhaps conflict with the team leader. These were not just material considerations – full stomachs versus warmth and comfort – but choices between conflicting moral obligations. The leader of the women's agricultural team was not a remote functionary but a neighbor and perhaps a relative; her demand that each able-bodied woman worked three shifts a day could not simply be shrugged off.

Many women I interviewed also felt a deep debt of gratitude towards Chairman Mao and the Communist Party – not for improving their material lives, which remained impoverished, but for raising them above the status of a commodity that could be bought and sold. Old women still remember their price in cotton and endure teasing remarks by men about how precious or how cheap they were at the time of their marriage.⁸⁰ Against this debt of gratitude stood an obligation to provide clothes for the entire family so that they looked respectable in the eyes of the neighbors, to find good spouses for one's children, and to participate in the ritualized give and take that knit communities together. Openly or tacitly, husbands and in-laws

Scarce: Life and Death in Chinese Villages During the Great Leap Forward," *Journal of the Historical Society*, 10 (2010), pp. 117–165.

79. Interviews Wang Xiuzhen, 1 and 24 November 2006; Jia Yumei, 27 November 2006.

80. Interview Gao Xiulan, Zhouzhi, 10 September 2008.

encouraged women to side with family and community against state and collective: to glean cotton from the fields, to shirk collective work, and preserve energy for the long hours of domestic work that began after dark. However, when women were caught stealing cotton or shirking their collective duties, they alone were blamed – as they alone were blamed, and blamed themselves, for struggling with conflicting duties: “Who could I blame for being overworked? It was my own fault that I had so many children!”⁸¹

For many women, the only way to square the circle was to work ever longer hours, up to the limit of physical endurance. Most women's working days started before sunrise, preparing breakfast while men and children were still asleep. Fieldwork shifts lasted from 6.30 to 8.30 am, 10.00 to noon, and 2.30 to 6.30 pm, or, in busy periods, until sunset – a total of eight to eleven hours. Meals were short and hasty affairs, followed by a nap or a card game for men and household chores for women. After the end of the third shift, women cooked dinner and prepared food for the next day, washed dishes, and put the children to bed; by the time they were done with these tasks, it was close to midnight. It was then, when men and children were asleep, that most textile work was done.

Most women learned to spin at candlelight, in the moonlight, even by the light of an incense stick. In busy times, it was not uncommon for women to sleep only three to four hours every night. They kept themselves going by taking one-minute catnaps with their heads resting on the spinning wheel. Several women I interviewed said that the only real rest they ever had was when they fell sick from exhaustion, and even then they returned to work before full recovery. Pregnancy did not provide much of a reprieve either, because women worked into the eighth month and returned to heavy household chores (though not necessarily fieldwork) one month after birth.⁸²

CONCLUSION

As Stevan Harrell, an anthropologist of China, has pointed out, all revolutions are in a sense about the division of labor – about “what is work and what is not; about the proper kinds of work for men and women, educated and uneducated, rich and poor; and specifically about the differences between household-based and non-household based labor”.⁸³ The Chinese Revolution – here understood as a long process beginning in the nineteenth century and involving social, cultural, and economic as well as political transformations – replaced one division of labor, one world of work, with another.

81. Interview Nian Yuzhen, Zhouzhi, 12 September 2008.

82. Interview Zhao Xijie and Niu Fengqin, Zhouzhi, 4 September 2008.

83. Harrell, “The Changing Meanings of Work in China,” in Entwistle and Henderson, *Re-Drawing Boundaries*, p. 67.

In the old world of work, discredited among intellectuals but still very much alive at mid-century, almost all work took place in domestic arrangements based on gender and generational hierarchies but also on mutual interdependency between men and women. In the new world of work, labor was divided at the scale of the nation, between city and countryside, industry and agriculture, producers and consumers. Household-based textile work, for centuries the archetype of women's work and one of the two fundamental occupations of the realm, became insignificant and invisible: not being paid and public, not contributing directly to national wealth and strength, it could no longer be considered work. To the extent that it was perceived at all, it came to be thought of as part of physical reproduction: necessary perhaps, but repetitive, circular, and ultimately futile. This was true in particular under socialism, which glorified future-oriented work in factories and fields, work that remade the face of the earth, created beautiful new things, and moved the nation forward.

Textile work did not produce future; it reproduced life as it was, in its physical and social dimensions. The metaphor is tired, but women who span and wove did indeed reproduce a social fabric – in their labor at the wheel and the loom, in the exchange of cloth, and in the everyday use of clothing. These dimensions of rural women's work were only dimly perceived by a state that kept its eyes on distant goals and saw little value in the complex social ties that held village society together. Consciously or not, the state undermined local social reproduction: by banning showy ceremonies and excessive ritual expenditure, but more importantly by directing cotton and other raw materials towards "rational" uses, and thus denying rural people the material basis of their social and ritual life. It is interesting (but perhaps not surprising, given the many ways in which state socialism accepted the basic premises of the system it aimed to replace) that the Chinese socialist state played a role elsewhere left to the market: that of a disintegrative, disembedding force that disrupts local circuits of exchange and inserts goods and people into larger flows that are better adapted to the production and extraction of surplus value.

But of course socialism did not replace household-based textile work; it perpetuated it. The ironies are palpable: the effort to construct a textile industry that would enrich and embellish people's material lives and liberate rural women from the loom instead led to the entrenchment of the very industries that it sought to replace. This was not simply a survival of an outdated industry, kept alive by a sentimental attachment to homespun cloth or to traditional gender roles. Women continued to spin and weave by hand not in spite of but *because* of the industrialization of the textile sector – because of policies that, on the one hand, left little cotton in the countryside, but on the other kept rural people so undersupplied that they were forced to produce cloth with whatever scraps of cotton

they could find. State planners could have attained their dual aims – mobilizing *all* rural female labor for work in agriculture or infrastructure and ensuring that *all* cotton was processed in factories and contributed to accumulation – by raising farm incomes or by lowering the price of factory cloth. However, this would have reduced profits in state industry and slowed down capital accumulation.

In other words, as much as state officials criticized backward and inefficient manual textile industries, as much as local governments tried to minimize the amount of cotton left in farmers' hands, there was no serious attempt to make rural people switch to factory cloth. Instead, planners tacitly assumed that rural people could make do with very little clothing and that rural women would somehow manage to provide for the most pressing needs, despite the fact that state and collectives left them with little raw materials and labor time. Unpaid and invisible as it was, women's textile work underpinned socialist accumulation, as much as it underpinned the reproduction of village life.