

The Economics of Respectability: Rural Incomes, Instability and Gender Norms in Late Imperial China

Kenneth Pomeranz

Chancellor's Professor of history

UC Irvine

klpomera@uci.edu

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Introduction

The paper that follows represents a very preliminary attempt to link two bodies of literature that thus far have not talked to each other very much. One, in which I have been a participant, provides a reassessment of economic development in rural China, and suggests that, at least until the late 18th century – and at least in the Lower Yangzi and other “advanced” areas -- living standards, labor productivity, etc., were considerably higher than we have often thought. The second body of literature, which is not particularly focused on China, is one presumably well-known to this group: research (much of it inspired by James Scott's early work) which seeks to understand social protest in relation to poverty, and poverty in relation to a) economic insecurity (not necessarily a matter of average year incomes) and b) situations in which, while people's biological subsistence may not be threatened, their cultural subsistence -- the ability to carry out the activities that allowed them to feel they were members of their community with some dignity – was imperiled. There has been some work making arguments of this sort for the Chinese Revolution (e.g. Thaxton, Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden), but even for that event, much less than we might expect, given the argument's logical appeal; and there has been almost nothing advancing these kinds of arguments as a way of understanding social change and rural protest in late imperial or republican China.

There are, it seems to me, at least 3 subject areas that need to be examined as parts of such a project. One, which will take up most of my paper today is to focus on the economics of labor

and female respectability (which, of course, reflected on their male kin as well). Since female respectability involved minimizing contact with non-kin males (and preferably binding one's feet), this is closely related to the ability of women to contribute an income while staying indoors: usually through participation in textile production. The second involves the group of men often referred to as "bare sticks" or "rootless rascals": men at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, often (but not always) landless laborers, who could not afford to marry, and thus could not carry on the family line, guarantee a continuation of ancestral offerings for themselves and their parents, etc. (A combination of sex-selective infanticide, concubinage, and pressures on widows, but not widowers, to avoid remarriage meant that there was always a significant surplus of men seeking mates.) Recent work has suggested a new link between these first two topics, as Matthew Sommer has found evidence that some significant number of men in this category lived in unconventional marriages (2 men and a woman): relationships which were illegal under Qing law, but which Sommer argues were widely accepted by at least poorer Chinese.¹ Last, and perhaps most difficult, would be the direct investigation of the sociology of life-cycle rituals: how many people in a given time or place were able to invite people beyond immediate kin to mark their wedding? Birth of a child? Funeral for a parent? Some interesting work by Yan Yunxiang on one village in Heilongjiang does catalog the growing number of ritual events that people have hosted since 1949, the growing number of people they can invite each time, and suggests that – in stark contrast to the ritual scarcity of the 1930s – this enhanced ability to participate in ritual exchange is a crucial part of what rural people value about the Revolution.² One could potentially link such an argument to the literature suggesting that much of what peasant supporters – or at least male peasant supporters – of the Revolution have valued, through all its many shifts in policy, was the way it gave them the opportunity to be head of a "normal" family, often acting (as feminist scholars have pointed out) to democratize male access

¹ Matthew Sommer, "Polyandry among the Qing Poor," in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson, eds., *Gender in Motion* (Rowman and Littlefield, in press), pp.

² Yan Yunxiang, *The Flow of Gifts* (Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 225-226.

to the position of household head while shoring up the prerogatives of that position.³ But at least for the foreseeable future, this must be speculative: the sources for a systematic investigation of people's ritual participation before 1949 (not to mention in the Qing) are extremely scarce. For the rest of this paper, I will focus on the first of these three areas, with occasional brief forays into the second.

Women, The Textile Economy, and Long Run Development in Late Imperial China

A principal feature of the late Imperial and Republican economy was the growth of rural handicrafts, particularly textiles. It is generally agreed that the increase in textile production meant a significant increase in production for the market by women: especially though not exclusively in the Yangzi Delta. But scholars have disagreed sharply about the implications of this work for women and their families.

Some have insisted that the cotton economy raised the living standards of those involved in it. It is also often asserted that women increasingly specialized in textile work, leaving the farming to their husbands while their husbands left spinning and weaving to them. This kept women indoors more than ever, but the meaning of that confinement is debatable. Some see the status of peasant women improving as they became able to reconcile a larger economic contribution with conforming to culturally prestigious near-seclusion. Others argue that greater seclusion, coupled with increased labor for the market without an equal decline in domestic responsibilities, made women's lives harder.

Others, meanwhile, argue that textile work was part of a desperate, highly labor-intensive effort to maintain subsistence as population rose and farm sizes shrank. Toil increased for everyone, but household income stagnated, and nobody reaped significant benefits. Women might have gained some "freedom" as their families were increasingly unable to afford a strict gender division of labor, but this freedom consisted mostly of greater exposure to an exploitative world. This last position seems increasingly untenable for the broad sweep of late imperial and

³ See, for instance, Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (University of California Press, 1983).

Republican history, but it may hold for certain times and places, albeit with important modifications: e.g. that the “subsistence” which families struggled to maintain was not a biologically fixed target but a socially constructed one that crept slowly upward over time.

Evaluating these stories requires disaggregating late imperial China, since the answers and even the relevant questions vary for different regions and times. We also need to get the economics of textile production right (these are becoming increasingly clear, at least for Jiangnan) and track differences between more skilled tasks (usually done by women in the prime of their lives) and others. It is also worth remembering that, there was more to both rural industry and women’s work than textiles: we will eventually need far more attention to activities such as food processing if we are to really understand the gender division of labor and the lives of rural women.

When we find that work traditionally considered appropriate for women was also the most lucrative work available for women, the robustness and continuity of those norms becomes easier to understand. But in some ways those cases frustrate the historian: we learn more about people from the choices they made when economic rationality and accepted values pointed in different directions, and families made painful sacrifices along one or the other of these axes. And when large numbers of families cannot afford to uphold established norms, they raise crucial questions about the relationship between social and cultural change. One can imagine either that people might abandon norms they could not afford, experiencing some degree of liberation in the process, or that they might continue to care about those norms enough (either for their own sake or because they knew that others would measure them by their failure to uphold them) that a sense of degradation would be added to their economic woes. While the history to follow will provide a variety of relationships among (relative) freedom, income levels, quality of life (including leisure or the lack thereof), and respectability in different regions and periods, the general picture is one in which the relative economic value of different tasks changed much more rapidly than accepted notions of the gender division of labor. Those who could afford to might sacrifice some income for respectability, and in doing so helped reinforce or further accentuate norms which differentiated them from poorer families and regions. Those who had to put

income first did not go unnoticed – indeed, they sometimes produced a sense among their “betters” that respect for proper behavior was crumbling -- but do not seem to have greatly undermined those norms as norms. On the whole, the growth of the textile economy seems to me to have been part of a slow but perceptible ratcheting upwards of living standards, labor inputs, and expectations for female propriety over the course of the late empire: changes that were only partly reversed by the economic decline that afflicted large parts of the country in the 19th and (in some cases) early 20th century.

Two Contrasting Visions

In two provocative papers, Mark Elvin has argued that the Yangzi Delta prefecture of Jiaying experienced continuing growth and a rising material standard of living in the late empire, but at the cost of increasing environmental fragility and overwhelming work burdens for women. ⁴ He also suggests that under the stress of ecological/economic necessity, the “traditional” gender division of labor broke down. Women, he argues, became increasingly heavily involved in farming as part of highly labor-intensive strategies to cope with an environmental and demographic crunch; they also became more involved in buying and selling, and various other activities in public. They paid for this, however, with work lives so demanding that they increased mortality rates. By contrast, Elvin considers two frontier prefectures -- Guiyang in Guizhou and especially Zunhua, near the Great Wall in Northern Zhili -- where people pressed less heavily on the environment, material life was more spartan, and women were much more confined, but lived considerably longer.⁵ Using two different methods, Elvin comes up with life expectancies for Guiyang women of 32.0 or 30.4; a remarkably high 50.0 or 48.1 for Zunhua;

4 In saying that the material standard of living rose despite these other problems, Elvin differentiates this position from the “involutionist” position, which posits that rising workloads merely insured bare survival, and which now seems untenable. See Pomeranz “Beyond the East-West Binary,” for one refutation; Elvin, Review of *The Great Divergence*, 749 for a strong statement by Elvin that Chinese living standards were indeed quite high in comparative perspective even as late as the late 18th century.

⁵Elvin, “Blood and Statistics,” pp. 142-73; Elvin, “Unavoidable Environment,” pp. 4, 8-19.

and a dismal 24.5 or 18.3 for Jiaxing. (Elvin himself says that the last number is implausibly low.)⁶ These estimations are subject to large errors, but there is no particular reason that those errors should affect relative longevity across these prefectures.

Li Bozhong sees a very different late imperial Jiangnan, in which an improving material standard of living went along with generally improving or stable life expectancies for both males and females (except perhaps for newborns, given the importance of infanticide for population control in his story). Both men and women worked more, but this represents a benign decrease in “underemployment.” And where Elvin sees the “traditional” gender division of labor breaking under new stresses, Li argues that it was not *until* the Qing (and at first only in Jiangnan), that “man plows, woman weaves” came to describe the lives of ordinary families as well as their aspiration. Consequently, though the phrase “husband and wife work together” (*fu fu bing zuo*)-- a term so elastic that it could fit almost any work routine -- had once been as proverbial as *nan geng nu zhi*, rhetoric now shifted to match changed realities, and *fu fu bing zuo* largely disappeared.

I have suggested elsewhere that such a shift might have been partly a matter of more families feeling they could afford to keep women sequestered amidst the rising incomes of the high Qing,⁷ but Li emphasizes economic efficiency, arguing that improved techniques for farming, sericulture and rural textile production made all three kinds of work more skilled and more specialized. As quality requirements for marketable cloth increased, and as more silk-reeling moved from homes into specialized sheds near market towns, the women involved ceased to also help in the fields.⁸ Thus economic growth was associated with better lives, greater skill levels, a *sharper* gender division of labor, and a mixed picture for sequestration (more women working away from home, but also more working indoors instead of in the fields, and probably more

⁶Elvin, “Blood and Statistics,” p. 142.

⁷Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, p. 249.

⁸Li, “Cong ‘fufu bing zuo’”; Li, *Agricultural Development*; Li, *Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua*.

footbinding). And while Li focuses on Jiangnan, he suggests that as several other areas of China began their own “proto-industrialization,” they moved in similar directions. Interestingly, the early Qing references to rural cotton textile production in Shandong collected by Xu Tan often refer to both men and women spinning and weaving, later quotations mention only women.⁹ This does not represent the literal truth -- we know that some North China men wove and even spun during slack periods during the Qing, and did most of the commercial weaving in the emerging Northern textile centers of Gaoyang and Dingxian during the 20th century¹⁰ – but it may indicate a trend in *normative* gender roles that tracked what Li describes for Jiangnan in an earlier period.¹¹

Despite their differences, these competing perspectives both rely on a trans-cultural logic of income maximization under certain largely physical constraints -- and ground at least partial explanations of cultural change in that logic. Both agree that labor effort per person increased, and that women’s work producing for both local and long-distance markets became more important – though in different ways. (Li argues that women’s earnings increased; Elvin does not address that point, but argues that every bit of income became increasingly essential as non-market sources of security disappeared.) Both assume that deliberate fertility control was important, though they differ on how much population pressure there was. And both agree that the rigidity with which male and female spheres were separated (understood both in terms of space occupied and tasks performed) is a separate matter from the material welfare of women.. Indeed both suggest that these things moved in opposite directions. While we might expect that women’s material welfare and the flexibility possible for them would move together -- either

⁹Xu 1998: 89-92.

¹⁰ See Linda Grove, “Rural Society in Revolution: The Gaoyang Weaving District, 1910-1947,” (UC Berkeley Ph.D. dissertation, 1975) p. 26, on Gaoyang.

¹¹Francesca Bray has, however, suggested an almost precisely opposite shift on the level of rhetoric and representations: one in which *men* became more prominent in representations of weaving over the course of the late empire. Even at that level, though, there were significant exceptions. See Bray, *Technology and Gender*: 239-252.

because greater freedom to move across space and undertake varied tasks will give enable people to help themselves or because an increase in the importance of somebody's earnings to their family will make others more solicitous of them, and/or allow them to make more claims on the family pot -- a different logic seems to have animated the late imperial Chinese family system.¹²

Men, Women, and Household Economy in Late Imperial Jiangnan

Some Chinese women have produced for the market since ancient times, but a distinct female role in production for use beyond the household began receiving more attention with the rise of the mid-imperial textile economy -- which often emerged from state demand for specific in-kind contributions.¹³ (In other cases, estates forced the wives and daughters of their bondsmen to weave, so that the demand was again involuntary and in-kind;¹⁴ for many formerly bound households that became tax-paying free commoners after 1500, it may have seemed natural to instead render cloth to the state.) By the end of the Ming, state demand for rural cloth had been largely absorbed into cash taxes, but selling silk and cotton textiles had become crucial for many rural households, especially in Jiangnan: ranging from very poor households who sold cloth to eat through much more prosperous households for whom "survival" meant maintaining certain appearances and behavioral standards.

A crucial, often overlooked, point is that women's earning power appears to have been particularly volatile -- but became somewhat less so over the late imperial period. In good periods, rural textile producers might even out-earn their farming husbands, and if one smooths out short-term fluctuations in prices it appears that in the 18th century as a whole their earnings came surprisingly close to men's. Even a woman who had to do every part of the transformation

¹²Much of my sense of the logic of that system is drawn from Skinner, "Family Systems."

¹³Nishijima, "Early Chinese Cotton Industry," pp. 24-5, 30-33; Tanaka, "Rural handicraft" pp. 87-89.

¹⁴Nishijima, "Early Chinese Cotton Industry" p. 62; Walker, *Chinese Modernity and the Peasant Path*, pp. 37-39.

of raw cotton into cloth herself out-earned male agricultural laborers, though not tenant farmers. A woman who could mostly weave, while her children or an elderly mother-in-law handled less demanding tasks, would earn much more, though precise figures depend on how we value the labor of young or elderly family members.¹⁵ On average, rural women making cloth were certainly closer to matching their husband's earning power than they had been when farms were larger and women had helped cultivate them,¹⁶ and much closer to their husbands in earning power than were English women of the same period.¹⁷

But people -- especially poor people -- did not live "on average" in "the 18th century," but from year to year. Consequently, I have estimated the rice-buying power of a piece of middle-grade cotton cloth for selected years: the results are very crude, but give some sense of how volatile women's earnings were (1750 = 100):¹⁸

1634	110
1644	50
1654	20
1664	300
1674	67
1684	77

¹⁵ For the relevant arithmetic, see Pomeranz, "East- West Binary," pp. 548-51, 558-62, and Pomeranz "Facts are Stubborn Things."

¹⁶ Li, *Agricultural Development*, pp. 141-151 those people who see the move into textiles as a case of decreasing returns per labor day (e.g. Huang, *Peasant Family*; Huang, "Development or Involution"; Brenner and Isett, "England's Divergence") have thus made a basic mistake, confusing a comparison to the returns to grain farming done by men and textile production done by women with the real issue, which is the earning power of the same people (in this case women) as they moved from one task (farming, in which they had been much less productive than men, as reflected in their much lower wages) to cloth-making. See also Pomeranz, "East-West Binary," Pomeranz "Facts are Stubborn Things."

¹⁷ For the China/Europe comparison, see Pomeranz, "Women's Work."

¹⁸ Data drawn from Zhang Zhongmin, *Shanghai*; Wang, "Secular Trends"; Kishimoto, *Shindai Chūgoku no Bukka*.

1694	47	
1750	100	
1780	88	
1800	133 (see footnote 21)	
1835	44	
	1840	76

Even this shaky data yields some reliable inferences. First, the rice-buying power of cotton cloth did not track that of silk (which rose modestly in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and sharply after 1860);¹⁹ thus, this paper's conclusions do not necessarily represent all textile work, much less all women's work. Second, changes in the rice-buying power of cotton cloth were

¹⁹ On ratios of silk to rice prices see Zhang, "Peasant Household Economy," pp. 111-118 ; the pre-1860 data is extremely thin, but nonetheless suggestive.

largely driven by rice prices, which fluctuated much more than cloth prices until about 1700, and were still somewhat more volatile thereafter.²⁰

Raw cotton prices were also volatile, and would complicate the picture further, since some weaving families produced their own raw cotton while others bought it. For the most part raw cotton prices seem to have moved in the same general direction as those of rice, so that they would usually reinforce both the long-term trends and the short-term fluctuations.²¹ However, people do not seem to have stored cotton from year to year as they did grain, with the result that for anybody purchasing cotton to work up, year to year fluctuations would have been much more severe even than those above. For families working up cotton they themselves grew, on the other hand, such price fluctuations would have been an unimportant abstraction. At least in Jiangnan, those purchasing cotton to work up would have been mostly women who had very little access a man's earning power to fall back on: widows and those whose husbands worked particularly

²⁰See Wang , "Secular Trends," p. 50 for a graphic depiction of annual deviations from the 31 year moving average of rice prices, which decreases markedly after about 1700. This accords with a general sense that this was a period with fewer of the massive disorders that would send prices wildly up or down.

²¹For spotty data on raw cotton prices at Shanghai see Zhang Zhongmin, *Shanghai*, pp. 205-6. From the late Ming until the late Kangxi period, general trends in raw cotton prices seem to map those for rice fairly well, so that they would make the fluctuations even wilder, but in the same direction. In mid-century, raw cotton prices, like those for rice, seem to have shown far less pronounced swings amidst a general rising trend (stronger for cotton than for rice). After 1790, rice prices were roughly flat for 10 years, doubled over the next five, and then fluctuated modestly around that new, higher price until the Taiping Rebellion. Cotton prices hit several extremely high spikes between 1790 and 1810 (as much as 6 times the usual price), but in general seem not to have shown much of a trend: Zhang Zhongmin says that on the eve of the Opium War they were roughly double early Qing prices, which is where Kishimoto's scattered data (*Shindai Chugoku no Bukka*, p. 139) suggest they had gotten by the 1790s. This bump in raw cotton prices would probably depress the surprisingly high real earnings for weavers estimated above for 1800, bringing that year back into line with the general downward trend after 1750, and strengthening further the point that short-term fluctuations became less important in the high Qing.

small plots of land. Thus textile incomes probably had the greatest volatility for those most dependent on them.

Third, because rice prices were more stable after about 1700 (because growing long-distance imports made local harvest fluctuations less crucial), so were female earnings. The volatility of real earnings from cotton textile work probably also declined over the very long haul, beyond the 200 years reflected in these data, as markets became better developed. (This would be consistent with recent literature which suggests that rather than a “Song economic revolution” followed by long years of stagnation or decline until the late Ming boom, the Song-Yuan-Ming period may have seen a much more gradual diffusion and elaboration of institutional and technical changes that first emerged in the Song.²²) If we accept this, at least provisionally, it might also offer another perspective on the changing role of textile earnings in the family budget. Insofar as much rural textile production was originally either for home use or to meet an in-kind demand from tax-collectors or estate-owners, even huge fluctuations in the rice-based value of that cloth would not have affected the producers much. But once many rural families sold their cloth, prices became crucial, making economic life painfully unstable until markets became more predictable.

Interestingly, a recent book on North China suggests in passing (and unfortunately, with limited evidence) that that region also experienced an intermediate stage: one in which earnings from marketed textiles were particularly important in funding rural families’ ceremonial expenses.²³ This would be interesting in the present context because ritual expenses were large but irregular -- perhaps well-matched to an unstable income source, at least to the extent that one could schedule ritual events, procuring biological subsistence mostly through farming, and waiting for years in which cloth sales had been lucrative to hold weddings. Such a way of

²² See Von Glahn, “Introduction.”

²³Xu, *Ming Qing Shandong*, pp.89-90.

deploying textile earnings would have kept them culturally distinct from men's -- as some have suggested they were when textile production was tied to state demand.²⁴ (There might also be some continuity here with the observation that women continued to produce at least some of the textiles they brought with them into marriage, even once such goods were easily purchased for cash.²⁵)

It is also interesting in this connection that documents referring to female infanticide in Ming /Qing Jiangnan (and other parts of East and South China) all emphasize the high price of marrying off daughters, rather than the cost of supporting children more generally.²⁶ Assuming that the literati who made this point knew what they were talking about, it raises some interesting questions. First it would strongly contradict functionalist arguments which claim that there was a straightforward relationship between women's earning power and the net costs (brideprice minus dowry) of acquiring a wife.²⁷ Economically logical as this seems, it was apparently not the case. Secondly, a variety of scholars have linked the growing burden of dowries for all classes to the social anxieties attendant upon the emancipation of various "mean peoples" in the 17th and 18th centuries -- a liberation that muddied a previously clear line between those who could aspire to virtue (including female sexual honor) and those who could not, and thereby increased the pressure on status-conscious families to prove they were marrying off, rather than selling, their daughters by providing dowries that at least matched the bride price they received.²⁸

²⁴e.g. Bray, *Technology and Gender*, pp. 186-96.

²⁵Bray, *Technology and Gender*, pp. 188, 254.

²⁶For the Ming, see the citations in Chang, "Mingdai niying wenti," 1-4; for the Qing, Lee and Wang, *One Quarter of Humanity*, pp. 47-48, 60-61.

²⁷ See, for instance Hill Gates, *China's Motor*, especially pp. 121- 147, for a particularly strong assertion of this relationship; I have criticized this argument on statistical and other grounds in a review: see *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30:1 (1998): 73-76.

²⁸ See for instance, Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, William Rowe, "Women and the Family in the Thought of Chen Hongmou," Matthew Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in 18th Century China*, and Janet Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters*.

That payments made by the wife-giving family would increase as women's earning power rose relative to that of men certainly seems to confirm that some such social/cultural logic was at work, rather than a purely economic one, but the increase in complaints about dowries seems to be present before most of these emancipations took place, raising questions about the exact nature of the connection. If the financing of marriages among non-elite families was tied to female earnings in particular and those earnings were particularly unstable, this might provide another part of the explanation.

But for now we can only speculate that Jiangnan actually experienced a transitional period in which textile sales had become crucial to rural families' *social and cultural* reproduction/subsistence, but not yet to their biological survival (as Xu Tan's comment suggests occurred in Shandong). At any rate, some rural families had become dependent on textile earnings to purchase food by the end of the Ming, when those earnings were still highly irregular. Given this instability -- and since new farming techniques that families relied on required precise timing²⁹ -- it is not surprising that both Li and Elvin see a late Ming "degendering" of work, with both men and women switching among tasks in a scramble to make ends meet.

Indeed, one would hardly expect a stable gender division of labor (except perhaps among the rich) while economic returns to the epitome of approved "womanly work" varied as wildly as they did in the 16th and 17th centuries. Often, there would be too much to lose by being rigid about male and female tasks. The more predictable textile earnings of the 18th century would have made a firm division of labor less risky, while smaller farms meant that losing women's farm labor involved little sacrifice. (Forgoing potential income from peddling, etc., however, would have remained a genuine sacrifice to cultural respectability, though a generally affordable one during this relatively prosperous period.) . Thus Elvin's claims about a degendering of work and technology amidst economic and environmental stress may hold for late Ming and very early Qing Jiangnan, while Li's picture of greater investment in specific skills and a sharper gender division of labor would hold for the high Qing. (We will turn to the post-Taiping era later.)

²⁹Elvin, "Unavoidable Environment," pp. 42-3; Li, *Agricultural Development*, pp. 68-75.

While Elvin cites material from late 19th century gazetteers saying that in Jiaxing and Shanghai even young married women were conducting many transactions in public (much to the consternation of the authors), he notes that most of these materials are copied from earlier editions; they appear to come from to the 17th century.³⁰

There are thus grounds for thinking that while the late Ming breakdown in the Confucian *sexual* order probably did not extend beyond specific elite circles, as Matthew Sommer has argued,³¹ other parts of the gender system may have been visibly breaking down even among peasants, at least in the closely-watched Delta region; this may well have led people not used to seeing respectable women in public to infer a broader breakdown of mores. At the same time, a firmer gender division of labor in the high Qing suggests that commercialization per se need not erode “traditional” gender roles. There are parallels here to Richard Von Glahn’s observation that in 15th-17th century Jiangnan, the god of wealth was seen as subversive of the sexual order – being not only a prolific seducer but a rapist – and his economic favors as huge but fleeting, while in the 18th century he assumed a stabilizing and beneficent guise. Von Glahn himself links this to the greater stability of Qing markets, though his focus is largely on the eventual success of the Qing in stabilizing the monetary system, rather than the markets for goods emphasized here.³²

Meanwhile, increased commercialization may have meant that in the Qing the sale of sexual services, and of women themselves, became more common, with some relatively poor men becoming purchasers for the first time. (This seems almost inevitable in an increasingly commercialized society that also had uneven sex ratios and unequal legal rights for men and women.) Because these irregular relationships among the poor became more common and more visible, some scholars have inferred that poverty must have been increasing, but this need not

³⁰Elvin, “Blood and Statistics,”p. 151. Lu, “Arrested Development,” pp. 481, 483, cites sources from the 18th and 19th centuries indicating that in this period male household members handled the market transactions.

³¹Sommer, *Sex, Law ,and Society*, pp. 1-2, 15-16.

³² Von Glahn, “Wutong in the Social History of Jiangnan,” pp. 691-694, 697-698, 701-714.

follow. The increase of such transactions could reflect increased use of money among the poor, independent of trends in the standard of living, and of wage labor opportunities which, however unpleasant, kept many young men from simply dying off. It could even indicate improving living standards, as the survival strategies of those at the *very* bottom (a large number of Sommer's wife-sellers, for instance, were not merely poor but chronically ill or disabled, as were almost all of the first husbands in his wife-sharing examples³³) were not only increasingly visible in a more mobile society, but stood out more sharply in contrast to able-bodied and respectable poor tenants, who increasingly kept "their" women at the loom, away from the gaze of others.

But can we describe 18th century textile producers as relatively prosperous and secure, except in contrast to the undoubtedly wild 17th century? Some historians, on the contrary, see this as an era of painful population pressure, in which the returns to women's labor were extremely low, perhaps even below subsistence. Relative predictability at those levels would hardly seem likely to support a rigidification of the gender division of labor (unless all other female activities earned even lower returns). Having already written at length on these issues, I do not want to rehearse them all here. But some important points now seem well established.

First, it is no longer possible to claim that the returns to textile production in 18th century Jiangnan were at a bare subsistence level. The case for that proposition turns out to rest on arithmetic and other errors, and at least 3 different methods of calculation converge on a common result: one which suggests that women in mid 18th century Jiangnan who engaged proportionately in all parts of the process of turning raw cotton into cloth would earn about enough per day to provide rice for a bit over 4 adult person-days.³⁴ (Remembering again that such averages would fluctuate significantly from year to year.) To the extent that an adult woman could delegate spinning, cleaning, etc., to others and concentrate on weaving, she could make

³³ See Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society*, p. 318 and "Polyandry Among the Qing Poor," pp. . . . On customary recognition of married men who became *disabled* bringing in a second "husband" See Liang Zhiping, *Qingdai xiguan fa*, p. 70. He makes no mention of acceptance of polyandry under any other circumstances.

³⁴ Pomeranz, "East-West Binary," pp. 547-550, 561.

much more, since weaving paid many times more than those tasks. (Roughly 15 times as much if one includes the time of a second person – often a child – who helped at the loom, and 30 times if one counts only the weaver herself.) But – probably because weaving paid rather well and spinning quite poorly – there appears to have been relatively little yarn for sale; concentrating on weaving generally required having kin who would provide yarn. Despite some exceptions,³⁵ the market did not generally replace the family (or extended family) in organizing this part of the division of labor. Thus it is somewhat misleading to think of the value of “a woman’s labor” outside of her particular family structure: teenage girls or an elderly mother-in-law, for instance, might be economically quite valuable insofar as they could supply yarn for their 35 year old mother/daughter-in-law to weave, but become economic liabilities overnight if that woman died and nobody else in the family could weave. Market-induced instability seems to have decreased during the 18th century, but there were many other sources of disruption.

Sometime after 1750, the rice-buying power of low and medium grade cloth began to decrease. But this was decline from a fairly high level, and it was probably quite some time before it affected women’s earnings enough to undermine Jiangnan’s basic pattern of relative prosperity and a sharp gender division of labor.

The average quality of both the cotton cloth and the silk produced in Jiangnan appears to have improved over the first two thirds of the Qing.³⁶ Thus the above-noted downward trend in the rice-buying power of a fixed quality of cloth after 1750 does not necessarily represent the earning power of actual weavers; to the extent that they switched to higher qualities of cotton cloth (which often sold for roughly twice as much as middle-grade cloth, without taking twice as long to make), rural Jiangnan weavers would have maintained more of their earning power -- both absolutely and relative to those doing other tasks – than these numbers suggest. “Higher quality” did not always refer to more durable or comfortable cloth: often this was more a matter of styles, colors, etc. The important point is that they fetched a higher price -- and to the extent

³⁵ Li, *Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua*, pp. 63, 71, 76, 82-83.

³⁶Li , *Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua*, pp. 53-57, 60-61, 63-65,81-82, 84-85.

that weaving in each style was a local specialty, these gains may represent an investment in highly specific skills. On the other hand, it leaves us in some doubt about how much of the higher prices were actually captured by dyers and other male townspeople. And to the extent that this proliferation of market niches increased control of the cloth trade by outside “guest merchants” who tied producers to style-sensitive markets,³⁷ the increasing marginalization of local marketing (some of which, as we saw, had been done by women) might represent another instance of earning power being at odds with flexibility of roles.

Meanwhile spinners, whose product was more generic, had less chance to buffer unfavorable price trends. While price data for yarn is extremely fragmentary, it seems very unlikely that they could have risen enough for spinners to maintain their real incomes between, say, 1750 and 1850. Thus, while Li may be right that mid-18th century spinners were somewhat better off than some other scholars have suggested,³⁸ I am skeptical of his claim that spinning was a consistently viable way for adult women to support themselves. Yet there still needed to be almost four hours of spinning for every hour of weaving. Who did it and why?

Some answers are clear. Many Jiangnan spinners were young girls (or elderly women, no longer strong or dexterous enough for the loom), who had no other way to add to the family income and had to be fed anyway. Moreover, most of these girls were providing yarn that their mothers wove (not selling the yarn), and so were maintaining an integrated household enterprise which was reasonably remunerative; separate calculations of the value added by each person involved may be somewhat beside the point. When women in their prime spun, it was often for

³⁷ See Gary G. Hamilton and Wei-An Chang, “The Importance of Commerce in the Organization of China’s Late Imperial Economy,” in Giovanni Arrighi, Hamashita Takeshi, and Mark Selden, eds, *The Resurgence of East Asia*, esp. pp. 190-193.

³⁸Li, *Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua*, pp. 66-71; Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, pp. 320-322. (The forthcoming Chinese edition corrects some errors in these estimates, but the differences do not affect the basic argument.) See also Lu, “Arrested Development,” p. 480. For the best-known statement of the contrary view see Huang, *Peasant Family*, pp. 84-86; its errors are discussed in Pomeranz, “East/West Binary,” and “Facts are Stubborn Things.”

the same reason: to supply themselves with yarn needed for the more lucrative project of weaving. Relatively little yarn was sold, it appears: though more evidence on this point may yet surface.

The small size of the yarn market is somewhat puzzling. Since a woman could make much more money by freeing herself from spinning and doing more weaving, even if she had to pay well above the apparent going rate for yarn,³⁹ why didn't the price of yarn rise and the amount sold increase? Surely there were families – such as those of widowers with teenage daughters – which could produce yarn but not weave it, and needed extra income. Explaining why such households did not sell yarn is particularly difficult for those scholars who assume that women had few other ways of earning any money, and that most households needed every dime just to survive; but even those of us who take a more sanguine view would have reason to expect a larger yarn market than we thus far found.⁴⁰

Recently, however, Li Bozhong has argued that spinning was indeed increasingly common and viable as an independent, specialized occupation. Li finds sources indicating that some entire villages only spun, and it is hardly plausible that there would be villages where every household lacked women capable of weaving and/or access to enough cash for a basic loom.⁴¹ Li explains the spinning villages by arguing that what happened instead was that, as quality and thus skill requirements rose in the fiercely competitive cloth market, households that could not compete instead specialized in spinning.⁴² (Moreover, though Li does not say so, better cloth would often have required a more consistent quality of yarn, putting a premium on skill in this

³⁹ Pomeranz, “East-West Binary,” pp. 559-562.

⁴⁰ Note that in 20th century rural North China there was a large market in homespun yarn, despite returns that were probably as bad or worse than those in 18th century Jiangnan.

⁴¹ Purchase with cash would of course be preferred, but late imperial Jiangnan also had a great deal of small scale credit available. For evidence that such credit was widely used for production, and profitable to use even at very high rates of interest, see Pan, “*Rural Credit Market*,” pp. 46-72, 78-103.

⁴² Li, *Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua*, pp. 63-65.

field as well and probably eliminating much of the competition from children.) And because merchants needed reliable supplies of fabric with very particular specifications, they increasingly focused their buying on specific communities. The production of different kinds of fabric thus became local specialties, with the required skills taught and re-taught in that area. Nearby areas that were excluded from these niches then concentrated on the complementary activity of spinning. Logical though it sounds, this story leaves much to be explained.

Such a division of labor could be relatively stable if the women in spinning-only villages made reasonable amounts of money (even if less than those who also wove). But if, as seems likely, there were long periods in which the returns to spinning were very low (and the potential gains for any merchant who got impoverished spinners involved in weaving correspondingly high), the mechanism sustaining such a system becomes harder to understand. Certainly if the price of yarn in rice had declined as much as that of cloth for 1750-1850, by the latter date women who only spun would have been completely destitute; and unless spinners were almost completely insulated from the price shifts of that century, it is hard to see how they could have done well enough to reproduce a stable division between spinning only and spinning/weaving villages. Nor is it easy to see how particular villages could keep a monopoly on weaving knowledge in a world of village exogamy. Thus the apparently tiny yarn market remains puzzling. (some scholars strongly suspect that this is a largely a problem with our sources, but it is hard to explain why that would be so.)

With yarn hard to buy it is somewhat artificial to speak of the earning power of an individual textile producer without specifying not only the date and the woman's skill level, but the familial context. A skilled weaver, for instance, contributed more to her family's income than her 13 year old daughter could, and everyone must have known this; but it must have been equally obvious that this daughter's presence roughly doubled how much weaving her mother could do, and thus increased the family's income almost as much as having a second adult woman would have. This is one more reason to take to heart Skinner's observation that a

given family system (and economy) does not simply make sons more valuable than daughters, or vice versa: it generates an optimal mix of family members of particular ages and sexes.

Beyond Jiangnan -- and Beyond 1850

Jiangnan not only traded with a larger Chinese economy: it was often seen as a model region, not least in having so much of the female population involved in the “womanly work”⁴³ of textile production. Efforts were made to encourage fiber production and female textile work elsewhere in the empire. Those making these efforts envisioned moral improvement, increasingly reliable tax payments (thanks to the diversification of families’ incomes) and greater economic welfare for the families themselves. Whether because of this or not, there was a great diffusion of commercialized rural cloth production during the Qing, most of it by women.⁴⁴ There are reasons, then, to expect a recurrence of Jiangnan’s evolving gender division of labor, but also reasons to expect differences.

First, in no other area (except perhaps parts of the Pearl River Delta) did commercial textile production become as important to the family budget as in Jiangnan. Nor, I suspect, did any other place rely as heavily on the reputation of its textiles for high *quality*. Moreover, the exceptionally small size of most farms in Jiangnan meant that there was much less reason for women to do much agricultural labor: work at which they were far less productive than men, anyway. Jiangnan may also have been unusual in the extent to which earnings from the production of *low-grade* cloth lagged behind those in farming, since the methods (and thus labor productivity) involved in producing coarse cloth seem to have been fairly uniform wherever this production appeared, while the labor productivity in Jiangnan agriculture was considerably

⁴³See Mann, “Household Handicrafts,” Bray, *Technology and Gender*, and Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society* for three different, but compatible arguments highlighting the ways in which female attention to textile work (as opposed to either supposed idleness or various other income-producing activities) was thought to improve their character and help stabilize the society.

⁴⁴See e.g. Xu, *Ming Qing Shandong*, pp. 89-92 on Shandong. I discuss various possible reasons for this in Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, pp. 243-251, and in Pomeranz, “Agricultural Productivity.”

higher than elsewhere. (This would explain, for instance, why men were more prone to weave in North China than in Jiangnan – in both places, they were occupying the best-paying job available to them.) For all these reasons, families in other regions would have fewer economic reasons to focus on very specific female skills and develop as rigid a sexual division of labor as in Jiangnan.

At the opposite extreme from Jiangnan would be frontier zones: sparsely populated areas, often including many non-Han, where woods, marshes, and other unfarmed lands (Elvin's "environmental buffers") could still provide extra resources when crops proved inadequate. Most migrants to these areas, whether on the edges of the Han world or in internal highland areas, were males. The Chinese family system did not allow much migration by single women, either to cities or to peripheries, until 20th century factories with tightly-supervised dormitories made this more consistent with female respectability.⁴⁵ (Even then, however, female factory workers suffered considerable stigma, and were sometimes assumed to be incapable of appropriate modesty.⁴⁶) The importance of male-only occupations (e.g. logging and mining) on some frontiers, and the real or perceived dangers from restive minorities would only have reinforced this. As some frontiers became more securely Han (or more securely settled, in the case of some steep, previously unpopulated highlands), sex ratios would have gradually declined, but one can easily imagine reasons why even frontiers that were filling up quickly would maintain the sharp gender divisions of labor and strong tendencies toward female seclusion that Elvin sees in Guiyang and Zunhua. Where minerals or forest products dominated the cash economy, female production would be largely for home use. Highlands were often first settled during economic upswings by people selling forest products or cash crops to satisfy booming demand in core regions; when the economy slumped, such people often either left or, if they stayed, shifted to subsistence production (much easier once corn and potatoes became widely

⁴⁵I discuss some of the implications of this in Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, pp. 248-250. For a very clear treatment of the logic of the Chinese family system explaining this feature in comparative perspective, see Skinner, "Family Systems."

⁴⁶ See, for instance Lisa Rofels, *Other Modernities*, pp.

available).⁴⁷ In such situations, so-called “normal” family life might have been taking root just as the local economy was becoming less commercial, leaving women focused on domestic production and with relatively little reason to go out. Frontier families (including, or maybe even especially, recently assimilated minorities) may also have favored female seclusion as a way of demonstrating that they were on the right side of the ethnic/civilizational line.

One interesting exception to such frontier patterns, though, would seem to be the extension of tea-planting in the highlands of Fujian and Hunan. Women frequently worked growing tea, often for wages and under the supervision of non-kin. They also breached seclusion in other ways. Robert Fortune reported seeing women, along with children and old men, selling tea seeds at temple fairs, and seeing “housewives” --presumably respectable adult women – selling cloth in Fuzhou markets; Shigeta Atsushi cites a gazetteer saying that in the early Qing, both men and women worked as local tea merchants (not just cultivators) in Anhua, Hunan. (There is no mention of such activity later, when outside “guest merchants” took over the trade, perhaps paralleling the earlier disappearance of women trading in Jiangnan cloth markets.)⁴⁸ Moreover, cultural diffusion went both ways: in some places, “minority” customs that gave women more scope for activities outside the home seem to have influenced regional practices even long after the Han had become dominant.⁴⁹ But in general, it seems likely that most late imperial frontier zones were indeed areas of particularly sharp gender segregation and division of labor, at least for Han⁵⁰ families. This is quite logical once we see these areas, not as zones of particularly intense necessity and pragmatism (on the model of an iconic American “frontier family”) but instead as areas where families could meet their limited cash needs from the proceeds of male

⁴⁷See e.g. Leong, *Migration and Ethnicity*, pp. 118-123. I discuss one such case in Pomeranz, “Development, Disaggregation, Decline,” pp. 50-53.

⁴⁸Fortune, *Residence Among the Chinese*, pp. 4, 143, 248; Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains*, pp. 103-5; Shigeta, *Shindai shakai keizaishi*, p. 217.

⁴⁹See e.g. Stockard, *Daughters*, pp. 170-175.

⁵⁰Some poor lowland women adopted as “little daughters in law” by highland tea pickers might plausibly have been recategorized as “minority” women in the process.

labor, where the absence of some labor-saving goods available for purchase in core regions might have made women's work within the home particularly time-consuming, and where the continued presence of large numbers of single (and sometimes non-Han) males commonly deemed dangerous might have increased pressures for female seclusion.

More important, though -- at least numerically -- are the long-settled lowland regions that underwent rapid population growth (and/or re-growth after depopulation in the Ming-Qing transition): large parts of Hunan and Hubei, Sichuan, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Shandong, Hebei and Henan, and so on. In many of these places continued population growth in the latter half of the Qing went along with trends that are not easily categorized: trade across macro-regional lines (particularly along the Yangzi and the Grand Canal) often decreased, while *within* some of the same macro-regions, the regional economy diversified and internal trade increased.⁵¹

In many such regions, cloth production increased sharply as people within the region produced first low-grade and then middle-grade cloth that substituted for goods once imported from Jiangnan. As the process continued, some regions not only substituted local cloth for Jiangnan imports, but also began to sell cloth elsewhere. Yamamoto Susumu has traced this process for Sichuan from the mid-Qing into the Republic. He shows a leap-frog pattern, in which areas that began importing cloth from Northern Hunan/ Southern Hubei (which used to buy from Jiangnan before its cloth production increased) subsequently began to produce their own cloth instead, and in some cases then began exporting to other parts of Sichuan -- which later engaged in their own import substitution, began exporting to still more remote regions, and so on.⁵²

⁵¹Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, pp. 243-6. The long-term decline in trade along the Yangzi may have been even larger than I suggested. If Ch'uan and Kraus, *Mid-Ch'ing Rice Markets*, p. 77, are right about the scale of the Yangzi Valley rice trade in the 18th century, and Perkins, *Agricultural Development*, pp. 116-124 is right about the 1930s, these shipments had declined by a stunning 73% to 82%. Skinner, "Regional Urbanization," p. 713, n.32 argues that Perkins underestimated the 1930s trade, perhaps quite substantially; but even allowing for that, the decline from 18th century levels would be very large.

⁵²Yamamoto, "Shindai Shikawa."

It is worth noting that the opening of treaty ports, however many other processes in late imperial history it may have interrupted, only accelerated this one. Qing efforts to promote cotton cloth production were, so far as I know, limited to areas in which it was possible to initiate or extend cotton *cultivation*, creating the needed raw material on the spot; while a few fairly prosperous areas, particularly in Guangdong and Fujian, traded for raw cotton (mostly with sugar) and so began extensive cloth production without cultivating cotton, most of China's poorer regions (where the big population growth was after about 1750) did not. However, imports of foreign yarn in the late 19th and early 20th centuries allowed areas that did not grow cotton to begin making cotton cloth, spreading the import-substitution process still further.⁵³ And as we best we can tell, interior regions that lost cloth markets through these mechanisms did not find new niches by producing higher quality cloth the way Jiangnan had: instead these regions (and particularly their women) lost an important source of income, with sometimes very serious results.⁵⁴

In some cases, we can explain increased local cloth production in economic terms, as the most lucrative available employment for women (and some men). Most places in the empire were far less productive in agriculture than Jiangnan was, but many, once they began, could catch up quickly in the efficiency with which they produced the cheaper grades of cloth. Thus it quickly became advantageous for them to make cloth themselves, rather than buy it in exchange for grain or raw cotton. If this is correct, female rural textile workers outside Jiangnan might have been quite close to their husbands in earnings *per day*, though smaller supplies of cotton and smaller markets (due both to lower incomes and less transportation) would have meant that they worked for money far fewer days than their husbands did (while Jiangnan women probably

⁵³ See, for instance Huang, *Peasant Economy of North China*, p. 134, and Linda Grove, "Rural Society in Revolution," pp. 13-16, on Gaoyang.

⁵⁴ See Esherick, *Boxer Uprising: 70-72* for examples in North China. The Imperial Maritime Customs *Decennial Report for 1892-1901* describes a similar pattern for the area around Shasi (in the Hunan/Hubei cotton region) which lost many of its Sichuanese markets to imports of yarn.

worked almost as many days for income as their husbands).⁵⁵ In such an environment, it would also often make sense for men to both farm and do some weaving (unlike in Jiangnan) and this seems to have occurred fairly often. Indeed it is in 20th century North China (particularly Gaoyang) that we first find large numbers of rural families in which both husband and wife got most of their income from textile production, with agriculture becoming a minor supplement as farm sizes shrank in a region of non-too-fertile fields.⁵⁶

In other cases -- such as parts of Hunan, where the profit-maximizing use of additional labor might have been to increase the double-cropping of rice – economics may not explain the growth of cloth production, and it seems reasonable to invoke cultural preferences for keeping women indoors, being more easily able to bind their feet (or bind them more tightly) without decreasing their earning capacity, and the supposed advantages of textile work for inculcating diligence and other positive values in women.⁵⁷ It is tempting to think that at least in the Middle Yangzi, the spread of such social ambitions was originally stimulated by rising prosperity during the 18th century export boom, but it certainly seems to have overspilled that, both temporally and geographically. In much of North China, for instance, it is likely that there was a long-term decline in living standards from the high Qing to the Republic; yet female seclusion was certainly prized there.

⁵⁵ See Li, *Agricultural Development*, pp. 150-151; Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, pp. 101-2 and Xu Xinwu, *Jiangnan tubu shi*, pp. 215, 469, 472-553 for some estimates of days worked per year in Jiangnan textiles; data for other regions before the 20th century are extremely scarce. On the work year in agriculture (probably no more than 200 labor days per 10 *mu* farm in the mid Qing), see Li, *Agricultural Development*, p. 139.

⁵⁶ Grove, "Rural Society in Revolution," pp. 26-29

⁵⁷ See Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, pp. 249-250. A precise analysis of how profitable it would have been to mobilize female labor for double-cropping rice would depend, *inter alia*, on a careful breakdown of the tasks involved to see how many (such as pumping water without the aid of an ox, or transporting and spreading manure) were ones in which upper body strength conferred a large advantage – something on which I have been unable to find good information for the Middle Yangzi in this period.

In all likelihood, then, the general path we see in these densely settled regions differed both from Jiangnan's path and that of the frontiers. Certainly the growth of population density and of textile production coincided with increased ecological stress. Various sorts of "environmental buffers" disappeared as lake sizes decreased, forests disappeared, and so on, and in at least one North China case, fuel-gathering -- usually a job for women and children -- became much more difficult.⁵⁸ Some people in these areas brought new resources into play -- growing peanuts or opium on previously useless land, making "black salt" and related products on the saline old beds of the Yellow and Huai Rivers -- but they did so by *commercializing* these previously unclaimed resources, not appropriating them for home use, as Elvin argues that people did with the forest and hillside plants of Guiyang and Zunhua.⁵⁹ The gender division of labor seems not to have become as sharp in other densely-settled areas as in Jiangnan: in North China, as we have already mentioned, men routinely wove and occasionally even spun during the long agricultural slack season.⁶⁰ The new kinds of production women engaged in mostly involved skills that could be learned very quickly, and so did not promote a sharp division of labor. And for the most part, we see little of the increased consumption of goods that might have decreased domestic work and left more time for specialized labor that one sees some of in pre-1850 Jiangnan, and which became more marked in some relatively prosperous 20th century areas as kerosene, matches, and machine-spun yarn made significant inroads.

But neither do we see the de-gendering of previously marked tasks that Elvin sees in Yuan and Ming Jiangnan. Married women may have cut opium plants, cleaned peanuts, and so on, but I know of no references to them personally marketing these or other products in the North. Other new ways that women earned money -- e.g. making straw hats and hairnets for export -- seem to have been entirely contained within the home. There may have been an increase in female field

⁵⁸Pomeranz, *Making of a Hinterland*, pp. 123-128.

⁵⁹On peanuts, Pomeranz, *Making of a Hinterland*, p.137; on salt and related products, Thaxton, *Salt of the Earth*, pp. 46-49, 63, 86-8, 113-27, 146-8, 168-77.

⁶⁰ Xu Tan, *Shandong shangpin jingji*, pp. 89-90; Gamble, *Ting Hisen*, pp. 53, 62.

labor and domestic labor, but not, it seems, in public visibility, except perhaps in places (e.g. Northeast Shandong) where large numbers of men were becoming migrants.⁶¹

The role of seasonal migration in underlining class distinctions and threatening the respectability of the poor in North China in particular deserves more inquiry. While Philip Huang has noted that, on average, middle peasants went to the market town much less often in North China than in the Lower Yangzi, and has argued that this points to a very local, village-centered world,⁶² he also notes that this was probably less true of poorer peasants; indeed, this may be precisely what distinguished more secure peasants from the truly poor. In early 20th century North China, the poor often traveled very significant distances to find wage labor, to glean, etc.⁶³ Preliminary research by Thomas Buoye on murder cases involving “bare sticks” in 18th century Shandong also suggests that they often found work far from home and may have been much more vulnerable (to dismissal from jobs or tenancies, and/or to being blamed for unsolved crimes) as a result.⁶⁴ The massive migration for 20th century North China to Manchuria is also striking in that (unlike Fujianese going to SE Asia, or Jiangxi people to Hunan and Sichuan), many of the migrants returned to North China annually, and tried to establish and maintain families there. In a brief article many years ago, Victor Nee suggested (impressionistically) that this kind of existence probably left the migrants’ wives vulnerable to voluntary or involuntary relations with other men, often leading to violence when the migrants returned; but nobody, to my knowledge, has tried to follow up on this, much less link it to earlier patterns of seasonal movement and/or polyandry among the North China poor.

⁶¹ Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han*, is a classic account of a poor woman from precisely this region forced to take on public roles in the very late Qing and Republic.

⁶² Huang, *North China*, pp. 222-3, 308-10.

⁶³ E.g. Pomeranz, *Making of a Hinterland*, pp. 82-83, Joseph Esherick, *Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, p. 27.

⁶⁴ Thomas Buoye, “Bare Sticks and Naked Pity: Repression, Representation and Reality of Crime in Eighteenth Century China,” paper presented at annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Seattle, January, 2005.

Interestingly, back in Jiangnan, the unusually sharp gender division of labor endured and may have deepened between the Taiping and the Revolution, even as the specific tasks and economic dynamics involved shifted. The post-1860 rise of new silk districts in the Western part of the Delta (particularly around Wuxi) brought many more women out of their homes into centralized filatures, a process that had already been evident in the silk-reeling sheds that grew up in and around Eastern Delta market towns during the previous century.⁶⁵ Yet while pre-mechanized silk reeling had involved special skills, and seems to have been practiced by women for as long as they could keep it up, working in the mechanized filatures required less skill (though much endurance); young women did most of this work, and usually abandoned it after marriage.⁶⁶ (Since it was originally promoted partly as a substitute for cotton spinning – often work for younger women -- as machine-spun yarn entered the Lower Yangzi on a large scale after 1860, this pattern reproduced an earlier life-cycle phenomenon.) The actual tending of silkworms was also overwhelmingly female, but remained home-based and involved both married and unmarried women.. These women may have had even less contact with non-kin males than pre-1850 cocoon producers: those women had often reeled the silk as well, and in some places that process had been supervised by skilled workmen hired in from outside.⁶⁷ While the Guomindang state tried to establish direct contacts with women engaged in 20th century sericulture, it did this through agricultural extension workers who were almost exclusively female.⁶⁸

While the returns to sericulture varied wildly -- not only due to price fluctuations, but even more to the inherent risks of total crop failure-- this does not seem to have encouraged a diversification of women's efforts, as the instability of cotton returns in the late Ming apparently

⁶⁵Bell, *One Industry, Two Chinas*, p. 97; Li, “Cong ‘fufu bing zuo’”; Li, *Jiangnan zaoqi gongyehua*.

⁶⁶Bell, *One Industry, Two Chinas*, pp. 103-4.

⁶⁷Fortune, *Residence Among the Chinese*, p. 374.

⁶⁸Bell, *One Industry, Two Chinas*, p. 136.

did. On the contrary, many women in this region intensified their commitment to sericulture during the 1920s, beginning to rear two crops of silkworms.⁶⁹ From the 1860s to at least 1900, silk was sufficiently lucrative that there is no puzzle about women concentrating on it (or about men concentrating on mulberry cultivation), even with fairly high risks; but estimates for the 1920s onward vary enough that one may need some explanation besides simple profit-seeking to explain what seems to have been an ever-greater degree of concentration on this one economic activity by women in silk regions.⁷⁰ (The concentration on one activity was such that when the silk industry in Kaixiangong village collapsed in the 1930s, the women became largely idle, rather than moving into any other kind of work.⁷¹) At least in Bell's account, rural Wuxi women who did not work in sericulture were mostly women who lived on particularly small farms which were particularly far from the area's urban core: their husbands often left for jobs in cities (they lived too far out to commute and had too little land to focus their labor on it), leaving the family's women to tend the micro-plot. Thus they were doubly disadvantaged and perhaps doubly isolated: their move into farming can hardly be seen as breaching traditional gender barriers, but was akin to what women left behind by migration (or death) and unable to hire a farm laborer had done for centuries (with the difference that many received remittances from

⁶⁹Bell, *One Industry, Two Chinas*, pp. 118-120.

⁷⁰Bell, *One Industry, Two Chinas*, pp. 110-121 estimates that the returns to labor in sericulture were very low, and sees emphasizes population pressure, cultural opposition to married women working away from home, and various forms of state-merchant power as the reasons why ever more women were ever more involved in this work. On the other hand Zhang Li ("Peasant Household Economy," pp. 35-63, 119-189) uses the same survey data as Bell to conclude that the returns to women's labor in sericulture represented a considerable improvement over other options and earlier conditions. Zhang's evidence is compelling for the period up to roughly 1920, but the situation is less clear thereafter. On the one hand, Zhang raises several criticisms of Bell's estimates for the 1920s-1940s that appear to be valid (particularly in Bell's use of price data), but there are some gaps in her evidence as well – in part because the survey results generally do not distinguish between male and female labor, and seem to count labor inputs in rather idiosyncratic ways -- so that the disagreement between her and Bell for this period is hard to resolve without access to the original survey data.

⁷¹ Fei, *Chinese Village*, p. 104.

their husbands).⁷² From another perspective, the situation of these women foreshadows the feminization of agriculture in parts of contemporary China (and earlier in Taiwan) as men moved into better-paying jobs; since this has occurred at the same time that many farms are being managed by single households again, many of the women taking over farming have not only fallen further behind their menfolk in income, but also in the extent of their extra-familial contacts.

Looking at cotton-growing Tongzhou, just North of the Yangzi across from Jiangnan, Kathy Walker describes what may be the closest 20th century analogue to Elvin's picture of late Ming immiserating growth and degendering born of desperation. Once largely a supplier of raw cotton to Jiangnan (an earlier incarnation of its textile industry having been mostly wiped out by Southern competition), the Tongzhou region began producing middle grade cloth for export (especially to Manchuria) after about 1880, using foreign yarn for the warp and homespun made from local cotton for the weft.⁷³ Most of the producers were tenants or part-tenants/part-owners on small farms, and both men and women wove in an attempt to fully utilize their looms and compensate for small, not especially fertile farms. The pattern became more firmly established during the Republic.

Walker argues that this rural industrialization did not make Tongzhou any more prosperous, and criticizes Thomas Rawski's claim that increased cloth consumption indicates an improvement in living standards; at least in Tongzhou, she argues, buying more manufactured cloth (which was less durable than homespun) represented a step *down* for people, forced on them by being too busy trying to scrape together a subsistence income to make cloth for themselves anymore.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, Walker provides almost no more general data on incomes or consumption, and the little she does have is from a wartime Mantetsu survey; but if she is right, her point would be quite important.

⁷²Bell, *One Industry, Two Chinas*, pp. 125-130.

⁷³Walker, *Peasant Path*, pp. 94-95.

⁷⁴Walker, *Peasant Path*, p. 223.

Walker also argues that as men took up the loom, Tongzhou women moved into agriculture for the first time, or at least the first time in quite a while. Prior to the 20th century, she says, there are almost no references to women in this area doing farm work except for weeding, yet 20th century women often worked in their own fields, and hired out as farm laborers. While this was due to the labor intensity of cotton production, and to men beginning to weave, it also reflected a more general, highly gendered process of proletarianization. As peasants' holdings proved increasingly inadequate (due both to the emergence of a new landlordism and to population growth⁷⁵), poor men and women had to hire themselves out more to make ends meet. Men, however, tended to get better-paying non-farm jobs, either locally or in the cities; if they hired out as farm laborers, it was usually short-term work between other jobs. Women, largely blocked from better jobs, were left to tend the family micro-plot and/or become hired farmhands. Though women were a minority of hired agricultural laborers, they worked the majority of hired days, in Walker's data. (There are serious risks in basing this conclusion on a 1941 survey, since wartime sent many men into armies or into hiding, but Walker sees the feminization of agriculture in Tongzhou as rooted in longer-term processes.) When the women who ran many small farms needed help, they hired other women, whom they could supervise more easily; big farms preferred women because they could pay them less.⁷⁶ (Cotton production, which involved less irrigation than rice, was also easier to feminize prior to the widespread use of power-driven pumps.) Thus, paradoxically, *work* was degendered in the sense that women took on tasks once considered exclusively male, but without a concomitant erosion of *spatial* restrictions and seclusion like that of the late Ming. Instead, Walker presents a grim scenario that combines additional work burdens, a stagnant or falling standard of living, and continuing or even increased seclusion. As noted above, the evidence for a falling living standards is thin, but this is certainly possible; and while the seclusion may also be overstated -- it may be that proximity to rapidly changing Shanghai area blinded people in the area to smaller local changes

⁷⁵ Walker, *Peasant Path*, p. 176.

⁷⁶ Walker, *Peasant Path*, pp. 215-8.

-- Bell and Walker between them certainly give us plenty of reason to doubt that the increased economic importance of female employment outside the home in the 20th century Lower Yangzi enhanced their autonomy.

The outcomes that Bell and Walker describe thus differ strikingly, not only from the “common sense” that individual earning power will enhance women’s autonomy, but from the situation that Janice Stockard describes for the Pearl River Delta: China’s second most advanced region, where silk played a leading role. While young women’s earning power there certainly did not create equality, it gave them considerable power to negotiate the timing and to some extent the terms of their marriages, or to resist marriage altogether. They could also resist certain other kinds of work -- as Tongzhou cotton workers, for instance, could not -- that might interfere with their ability to reel silk. And while this power was most effectively wielded before marriage -- when a natal family eager to hold on to a young woman’s earning power might well back her up -- spaces were created that benefitted women more generally.⁷⁷

Some avenues do seem available to advance this inquiry further. There are, for instance, some 1930s county-level data on purchases of imported and manufactured goods for Jiangsu and Zhejiang; it might be interesting to see how much these areas were using things that should have made managing the household a little easier for women, such as matches or kerosene, and how much of any growing consumption consisted of goods like cigarettes, which were consumed individually (mostly by males) and so would have done nothing to compensate or offset women’s additional labor for the market. This might clarify both standard of living issues and issues of what happened to control of the “family income” as it became more easily separated into parts earned by each member.

It may, in fact, turn out that much of the difference between Stockard’s relatively optimistic view of women’s work and autonomy and the much darker views of Bell and especially Walker

⁷⁷Stockard, *Daughters*. On “girls’ houses” and married women specifically, see pp. 45-47; on reelers being excused from some other household work, see 152-3.

can be understood in terms of the geographic and job mobility of *men* during the same period. While men were never as restricted in their mobility as women, they did not automatically control their movements or earnings either so long as they were part of something larger than a simple conjugal household. The degree of that control varied, among other things, with the location of their work. Where men remained on the farm and in the village (as appears to have been the case for most of them in the region studied by Stockard), the movement of women into off-farm wage labor (or even into more remunerative and specialized labor within the household compound) may well have been to their advantage, increasing their perceived importance and sometimes creating a small fund that they (or a more senior woman in the family) could draw on directly. But where men as well as women did more of their work outside the household economy, both geographically and in terms of the mode of production --- and men were able to move farther and faster, at least geographically -- the erosion of a unified household economy may have actually left men in control of a larger share of the family income than before. In such a situation, particular family configurations would have mattered enormously: a young wife with good relations with her mother-in-law, for instance, would be in a far better position to insure that a large share of the earnings of an absent husband went to immediate household needs than otherwise. And from an absent man's point of view, having a living mother in the household with his wife -- keeping an eye on her, while handling at least some of the tasks that necessitated dealing with non-kin males -- might have made him feel less anxious about being away.

Half-baked Conclusions

This paper has more questions than answers, and not only because of missing evidence. With respect to women's work and its material rewards, it has tried to pull apart certain questions that have often been bundled together, suggesting regional, temporal, and conceptual ways to subdivide them. Beyond such efforts, I think, lies the more complicated challenge of re-thinking the categories of "individual" and "family" in a Chinese context. As we often use them, this binary tends to make us think that a given shift in the gender division of labor (most of which, in the case of later imperial China, involved an increase in women's work -- and often of men's work,

too) either was compensated by increased autonomy *from* the family (as in Stockard's picture) or else represented intensified expropriation and exploitation *by* the family of what a given individual member produced.⁷⁸ Instead, I think, the shifting patterns discussed above speak to more specific and complicated trade-offs, in which individual and family often cannot be sharply counterposed. But saying we need a new vocabulary falls far short of providing one.

As for the question of "respectability" with which the paper began, the remaining challenges are even larger. It does appear, however, that there are a number of ways in which to reconcile a relatively prosperous high Qing period with growing numbers of people who could not be confident of the economic basis for respectability, even without assuming a particularly unequal or worsening distribution of income. (The former is unlikely for the high Qing, as I have suggested elsewhere, though our evidence is very limited;⁷⁹ the latter is possible, but hard to prove.) And in various periods and regions, it is not at all hard to see how the numbers of people in such straits could continue rising, whether or not that particular time and place was one of "crisis" as measured in terms of income per capita. Two crucial elements of this, I would suggest, were 1) the great (though gradually decreasing) instability of textile earnings, except in a few times and places, coupled with the increasing number of families for whom they were vitally important, and 2) what Elvin has elsewhere called the "democratization of virtue":⁸⁰ a late imperial tendency for more and more of the population to aspire to and be held to standards of behavior that at least until the mid-Ming had been thought appropriate only for better-off population groups. Though at this point the evidence is very thin, I would suggest that standards for social performance (including both ritual behavior and everyday observance of certain norms) rose, propelled in part by periods in which the textile economy allowed semi-secluded women to make significant contributions to family income, and that those standards proved

⁷⁸This is, for instance, very much the orientation of Gates, *China's Motor*.

⁷⁹Pomeranz, "Facts are Stubborn Things," pp. 175-178, and *Great Divergence*, pp. 50, 136-7.

⁸⁰Mark Elvin, "Female Virtue and the State in China," *Past and Present* 104 (August 1984), pp. 111-152.

downwardly sticky when either short-term fluctuations or long term trends made realizing them increasingly difficult for large numbers of people.

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