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Footloose in Fujian: Economic Correlates of Footbinding*

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One hundred years ago, Mrs. Archibald Little summarized the activities of Sichuan women with whom she was, after long residence in that province, quite familiar.

Except among the poorest of the poor, who do field-work or carry water, the women of China do little beyond suckling children and making shoes, except in the treaty ports, where now large numbers of them are employed in the factories lately started. (1898:122)

The idea that, prior to industrialization and/or socialist transformation, most Chinese women made few economic contributions to their households is still widely held to be true. From many years of fieldwork and thousands of interviews in Taiwan, Sichuan, Fujian, and Zhejiang, however, I know it to be wrong, based on the curious assumption that only wage-work generates value for households. Such a notion excludes women from social history except as

* Most of the quantitative data in this paper come from county surveys done from 1989 to 1992 as part of a large, joint project. They were collected by Professor Chen Zhiping, Dr. Lin Tingshui, Professor Shih Yilong, Dr. Zhou Xianghe, and Dr. Zheng Ling, all, at that time, of Xiamen University. I am grateful for the hospitality and cooperation of these and other colleagues: numerous members of Xiamen University; Professor Chuang Ying-chang and Dr. Pan Ying-hai of the Institute of Ethnology (Academia Sinica, Taiwan); and several western-based colleagues. Funded by the Luce Foundation, and headed by Arthur P. Wolf of Stanford University, the project is making available comparable data on a wide range of topics from approximately thirty-six hundred women and men over age sixty-five, from twelve widely dispersed counties, mostly in Minnan. While my participation in direct fieldwork was constrained by bureaucratic limitations, my week-long visits to fieldsites were made fruitful by the efforts of Professor Shih and Drs. Zhou and Zheng, who accompanied me to their fieldsites and generously shared expertise and information. I also thank Arthur Wolf for making available data from his extensive field work in this project.

These data, drawn largely from the work of others, are used here against the background of two large surveys I conducted in China with cadres of the Women’s Federation. Our work was supported by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, for which I offer our thanks. This material is still being analyzed, but provides detailed material on footbinding and economic contexts for five thousand Sichuan and 660 Fujian women who were over sixty-five in 1991–1992. I am most grateful for the efficient and friendly cooperation of the Women’s Federation in the accumulation of this large and carefully collected data set. Another sort of acknowledgment is also due here: to the people I interviewed directly during my field visits. Some social researchers now name their informants, to give individual persons a deserved voice in the historical record. With real regret, I do not provide my informants’ names in publication or in my fieldnotes. For the present, I prefer to maintain the anthropologically traditional anonymity of sources.

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reproducers of the labor force. But women were producers of other forms of economic value, and provided the essential labor for both famous and homely Chinese commodities. Eliding the work of women and children makes any real understanding of past and present Chinese political economy impossible. Developing a parsimonious, non-Eurocentric, conceptual model for late imperial and early twentieth-century China is a necessary step in developing that understanding.

The great majority of Chinese women, except among the richest of the rich, performed an enormous amount of socially necessary labor above and beyond the heavy task of caring for children. Food processing, the making of everyday cotton cloth for clothing and bedding, and the creation of labor-extravagant luxury commodities such as silk, grasscloth, hemp gauze, tea, opium, white wax, and many others brought cash into commoner households. I emphasize this feminist point not only to give credit where credit is due. Women and girls constituted a huge part—easily a half—of the manual labor force, for men and boys were far more likely to find economic niches that exempted them from “black hand” jobs.

We have little systematic information about women’s work in pre-revolution China for several reasons. The first is obvious, and I shall not belabor it. Past and present Chinese literati, whose class outlook was very similar to that of Mrs. Little in these matters, knew very little about manual work, and took what they knew for granted. The only women whose lives the literati chronicled were “ladies” conspicuous for their non-productivity. Even here, we should be cautious. The historian Susan Mann has argued that labor was expected even of elite women, kept busy by family elders not from economic need, but in order to maintain household discipline (1992).

A second reason that women’s labor has been underreported is that the value it produced was pooled with that of the family. When a household ploughs and sows and weeds and harvests and gins and finally spins a crop of cotton, distinguishing the value of different labor inputs is difficult. Even when some of that yarn is sold in the market for a specific price, calculating the contributions of each worker to the end product is neither easy nor, usually, necessary. This too is an obvious point, especially in situations where most of the product is made by the family and for the family, without the intervention of the market. In contexts where both products and labor are highly commoditized, however, such calculation is a highly salient aspect of family life.

A third reason for the invisibility of the work that women perform is that most of it occurs in the special, gendered form of “obedience” as subordinated kinswomen. Olga Nieuwenhuis, in her monograph on children’s work in rural Kerala, India (1993), offers an apt parallel to the Chinese case. Girls do not work independently; they “help” their mothers. Daughters-in-law are seen to “help” their mothers-in-law, wives to “help” their husbands. The role of active worker who might take credit for specific output is sunk in the culturally
much more significant kin relationship; the material output is veiled behind the submission to parental authority which motivates it. The work of little girls especially is given little recognition. One rarely hears a Chinese daughter or daughter-in-law who works under an older woman’s direction described as *qinglao*—hard-working; if she is praised, she is usually described as *hen tinghua*—very obedient. A woman described as “qinglao” seems invariably to be one who is not any other woman’s subordinate—a household’s senior female.

The embeddedness and near-invisibility of the labor of subordinate kin have seriously obstructed attempts to assess the contributions of women and girls to Chinese families unused to such measurement. In the absence of real data on women’s work, we cannot blame economists for trying to understand Chinese political economy as though women had no role in it. Getting those data, however, requires pushing the women I interview to move beyond talking about the submission and suffering their work roles entailed—this, they are very willing to do!—and to outline how much, in material terms, they actually contributed to their household economies.

After a brief summary of my view of late imperial Chinese kinship relations as society’s principal relations of production, I will discuss how footbinding indexes varying uses of female labor. These ideas are illustrated with three case studies from the valley of the Jiulong River in Fujian—in Tong’an, Nanjing, and Hua’an Counties—where I have done fieldwork to supplement the surveys of Professor Shih Yilong, Dr. Zhou Xianghe, and Dr. Zheng Ling. The trends apparent from these studies are tested against Dr. Lin Tingshui’s and Professor Chen Zhiping’s data on Anxi and Cong’an Xian, respectively, and against Professor Arthur Wolf’s findings on the Haishan area of north Taiwan.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAME FOR WOMEN’S LABOR

In previous publications, I have formulated some sturdy generalizations to order late imperial China’s complex division of labor (see especially Gates 1996). These situate the essential but culturally undervalued labor of girls and women at the intersection of two distinctively Chinese modes of production—two systems of transferring surpluses among social categories. One of these modes of production was a state/kinship hierarchy offering each person/status different but reliably fixed resources from a pool created by drawing differentially from the pool’s contributors. In the tradition of Eric Wolf (1982) I call this the tributary mode of production, or TMP. The other mode operated through a market in which households, not individuals, were the principal competitors. I call this the petty capitalist mode of production, or PCMP. Patricorporations—households (*jia*) and sometimes lineages (*zu*)—constrained and supported by the state were the principal institutions through which households and their constituent individuals engaged with these two distinctive modes. For purposes of daily production, control of labor that might ultimately be claimed by state officials was allocated to kin seniors, who might employ it in either tributary or
petty capitalist circuits. Separately and in interaction, these modes together structured the internal political economy of the late empire.¹

Unlike Europeans, Chinese did not replace the dominance of the hierarchical tributary mode with that of the market, and thus initiate an era of capitalism. Yet commodity production and markets became an integral part of Chinese life much earlier than they did in western Europe, with profound effects on kinship, culture, and social institutions.

Professor E. B. Vermeer and his colleagues, in a 1990 volume on Fujian, have formulated this contrast differently, casting it in regional terms rather than in terms of modes of production. For Vermeer et al., Fujian and its maritime commercial colonies constituted an alternative to an agrarian continental political economy. This is a helpful distinction. However, regional differences were not absolute, with some areas engaged in commerce while others remained purely agrarian and uncommoditized. Rather, China’s regions were marked by different balances or proportions of tributary and petty capitalist activities made possible by a wide variety of environmental and socially constructed factors. Petty capitalist forces were powerful in Fujian, as is well known. Tributary exactions such as tax claims and tributary disbursements such as expenditures for courts and garrisons were weak there—but not absent. Kin groups survived, and sometimes prospered, by dealing in both market and official circuits. In other regions—poorer parts of the north China plain, for example—the effects of the tributary mode were greater than in Fujian, dominating those of petty capitalism. Even in near-subsistence areas, however, both were present, and most households necessarily dealt with both. The concept of two modes of production, with differing weightings of each and, perhaps, differing interactions that result from those unequal weightings, enables us to describe more precisely the political-economic contrast between Fujian’s dynamic commercialism and the cautious physiocratic stance of its northern rulers.

Traditional Marxist mode of production analysis depends on distinguishing persons (sometimes households) into classes as social categories with different relations to the means of production. For late imperial China, however, class analysis has proven cumbersome. Based on a Eurocentric focus on the ownership of private means of production, it has ignored the importance of the public circuits of wealth. In China, petty capitalist circuits were generally subordinated to tributary ones. Very considerable quantities of social wealth flowed through the tributary channels of taxation, informal extraction by officials, production and storage of goods for state use, and disbursements of these resources on everything from imperial concubines to the wages and squeeze obtained by yamen runners (police-like subordinates in administrative offices). That wealth underwrote considerable power to constrain markets, and to oblige all households to respond first to tributary pressures. Yet where and when markets flourished, households might also be drawn by petty capitalist pressures to throw labor or capital into the market, and run the market’s risks.
Families necessarily made constant choices between the different logics of the two modes of production. Business profits could be reinvested in the family pawnshop, tea plantation, or paper-making enterprise; or they could be spent to prepare a son to enter officialdom, which—if successful—could bring far higher returns.

An example of such decision-making that returns this discussion to the issue of gender is the recurrent family dilemma about how to assure a daughter’s future. There was no single, set form of marriage for all Chinese women, as asserted by Jack Goody (1989), though what Arthur Wolf has called “major marriage” everywhere had high prestige. Especially in Fujian/Taiwan, disposal of daughters ranged along a complex continuum. Major marriage (a home-reared adult daughter married virilocally to a “matching” family, taking with her some dowry gifts to which her family had contributed) was most esteemed; outright sale of a baby or little girl brought no one honor, but might bring a cash return. In between were many possibilities in which age, interfamily equality, and bride-price versus dowry could be negotiated, sometimes to the material advantage of the bride’s parents. The continuum of treatment of girls and women from dignified major marriage to outright sale is well attested in recent literature (Wolf and Huang 1980, Gronewald 1985, Jaschok and Miers 1994), and forms an important background to the analysis presented here. In regions with very strong petty capitalist traditions, persons, as well as things and labor power, tended to become commoditized, and for women the line between employment and kinship was especially blurred.

FOOTBINDING AS AN INDEX OF FEMALE WORK REGIMES

Women’s work disappeared into kinship roles, and kinship roles for women were subject to a mystifying commoditization. How best to translate this complex set of gender, kin, and labor relationships into terms that allow for comparison across China, and with other social systems? The dramatic custom of footbinding suggests a strategy. Footbinding can be surveyed efficiently and relatively unambiguously; it was experienced by women who can still be interviewed; and it disappeared, permanently, within a generation or two, after a history of about a thousand years. Unlike other old customs, many of which are again resurgent, footbinding is thoroughly dead, even though the Chinese gender wars are as vigorous today as, perhaps, they have ever been. Thus, the practice may have something special to reveal about the unique historical trajectory of China’s gendered political economy.

Historically, footbinding diffused from elite to commoner women, but unevenly and with considerable regional variation. I believe that bursts of commoditization such as those characteristic of the southern Song and the Ming/Qing transition were particularly likely to encourage it. By the late imperial and early Republican periods, regional variation can be argued to depend on the kinds of life-career expected of girls and women (e.g., Blake 1994).
Binding a daughter’s feet enhanced her status, drawing a clear line between her and women who were sold into servitude, or employed in harsh or degrading forms of labor. “Bound-foot women became brides; the not-bound became bondservants,” was the phrase women used to explain why mothers subjected little girls to this torment. Older women, still or formerly footbound, showed me the binding cloth they had saved for their funerals. They planned to go to their graves with bound feet to assure themselves of an honorable rather than a slavish reincarnation. Footbinding asserted, and was an attempt to assure, a permanent status for a woman as principally a kinswoman—daughter, then daughter-in-law—rather than a woman who is commoditized by having her person or labor put on the market. In a society where petty capitalists commoditized women’s persons more frequently than their labor, adulthood might have worse torments than footbinding in store for the big-footed orphan or daughter of a careless mother. Estimating the effect of footbinding on local labor regimes requires the consideration of several variables. The most important are: the percentage of women ever bound in a given area; the average age at binding; and local trends in customary (i.e., not government-induced) unbinding after marriage.

Even within the Minnan region of Fujian, the percentage of women whose feet were ever bound at about the turn of the century varies tremendously from fieldsite to fieldsite, ranging from nearly universal practice to virtually none. The proportion of footbound women varies greatly in Sichuan and Taiwan as well. Yet Fujian—coastal, maritime, commercial—contrasts with Sichuan—inland, agrarian, tribute-dominated—in important ways. The average ages of footbinding in Fujian and Sichuan were twelve and seven years, respectively. Sichuan and Fujian also contrast in regional norms about unbinding feet after marriage. In many Fujian villages, it was customary for married women to let out their feet; this pattern was rare in Sichuan. There is, alas, no way to control empirically for another important variable: the differential effects of the fully-bound, arch-broken form of footbinding (which severely impedes heavy labor) as opposed to the much less crippling “cucumber foot” style in which the small toes are merely(!) secured under the sole.

THE LIGHT LABOR HYPOTHESIS

Footbinding existed throughout China as an elite custom, emulated by those who wished to enhance their family’s and their daughters’ status. Mothers ignored as best they could the agony their daughters suffered, and many girls willingly accepted the pain as the cost of the slightly hypergamous marriage that bound feet were expected to bring. If only family prestige and hopes for a better marriage governed footbinding, then all women should have been footbound. Our figures make clear that they were not. Footbinding precluded heavy labor such as porterage, collecting mountainside fuel and animal food, work in wet paddy, and a servant’s coarser duties. It did not impede light labor, such as
spinning and weaving cotton yarn and cloth, twisting and weaving hemp and ramie fabrics, raising silkworms and reeling silk, picking and processing tea, scratching and gathering opium, manufacturing insect-produced white wax, making paper and making spirit money from it, and a nearly endless list of similar possibilities. In regions where the most productive work for girls was heavy or wet, and thus incompatible with tiny feet, most girls were not bound at all, or were bound late and briefly. By contrast, in places where women produced more value in light than in heavy labor, the status-emulation pressures of foot-binding were hard to resist, and the custom spread through the class ranks.

That spread was checked at the boundaries of Han influence, where people of other ethnic identities found footbinding’s costs too high for any conceivable return. Nor did the practice penetrate Hakka communities, with rare elite exceptions encountered by Arthur Wolf and myself in west Fujian. Explaining the Hakka resistance to footbinding would require another paper; in brief, while Hakka men were off doing other things, Hakka women grew the crops, unlike virtually all other Chinese women. On Taiwan’s northern Han-Aboriginal frontier, and in the mixed Han/non-Han communities in northern Yunnan, footbinding became so overwhelmingly a sign of ethnic identity that correlations with labor disappear. In the absence of a locally-salient ethnic border, however, footbinding was likely to be common where light labor for women was general.

Light labor may be general—as cotton spinning and weaving were in the north China plain—because it produced one of life’s necessities, which would otherwise have to be purchased. Pre-industrial textiles were not cheap: Adele Fielde, a missionary of long residence in late-nineteenth-century Chaozhou calculated that the market value of the average peasant family’s clothing and bedding was roughly equal to the market value of all their agricultural means of production, land excepted (Jamieson 1888:114). In China’s cold north, sufficient clothing and bedding for a family might constitute a greater proportion of its assets, and require a great deal of female labor for its making. Specialized textiles like Fujian grasscloth were valuable commodities on the domestic and foreign market. Xiamen women from wealthy backgrounds reminisce nostalgically about the coolness and elegance of fine ramie xiabu for summer clothing. A woman in Cong’an county of north Fujian showed me locally made hemp gauze mosquito nets which, if of average quality, were formerly worth eight silver da yuan—the value of a plough cow. She herself had made one worth twenty.

In looking at the light labor of girls, we are sometimes seeing pure commodity production, and sometimes—especially in the making of cotton cloth—the manufacture of a product that could be flexibly used at home, sold, given as the customary funeral gift, or stored for later use or sale. Extra yarn and cloth always found a market, with spinning especially a permanent bottleneck in the lengthy production process. We know something of the historical impact of the
handicraft textile industry on women’s labor from the work of Philip Huang. In the lower Changjiang, spinning and weaving for sale were normal women’s work throughout the Qing (Huang, 1990). Such industries might have had a different history had it not been for the powerful parental control over young spinners that footbinding helped enforce. Footbinding, along with other hierarchizing aspects of kinship/gender relations, was an intrinsic part of a labor regime that turned tributary power to petty capitalist purpose, and gave China economic growth without transformation.

When the market for the products of little girls’ light labor collapsed, families that depended on everyone to pull his or her weight were obliged to send daughters into heavier labor. As many women told me, “just sitting here eating” was not an option. Footbinding ceased as the hope for a daughter’s better future was balanced again the family’s need for immediate resources. Further analysis of the materials should clarify these changes, which took place in the context of local availability of machine-made cotton yarn, the tea bust of the early twentieth century, and the silk depression of the 1930s.

It is commonly assumed that footbinding disappeared as the result of missionary and political campaigns against it. Chia-lin Pao Tao (1992) finds the missionary hypothesis unconvincing, as do I. Based on hundreds of conversations with elderly people, I would go further, and argue that even indigenous political activism had little direct effect on footbinding. In Sichuan, my research demonstrates a near-perfect absence of official anti-footbinding activity in rural areas and small towns during the Republican period. Fujian was a cauldron of political contention for the first half of this century. A handful of sixty Fujianese women I personally interviewed had heard in their youth that the government “no longer required” footbinding. But their discussions of family decisions about whether or not to bind rarely turned on such remote concerns; instead, they pivoted on the tradeoff between a girl’s potential marital prestige and her capacity for labor. Anti-footbinding movements were so unknown to my informants that I conclude they were largely irrelevant to the abandonment of the custom, and turn to three cases that illustrate the argument from political economy.

THE VALLEY OF THE JIULONG JIANG

The Jiulong is south Fujian’s major river, its mouth close to Xiamen, and its sea-navigable lower trunk passing Zhangzhou on its way to the sea. Deeper into the mountains of central Fujian, the river provides a sporadically usable and formerly important link between the many towns and villages of its upper drainage and Zhangzhou city, the coast, and even overseas. In the early decades of this century, the upriver areas supplied downriver towns with timber, charcoal, and more than three thousand tons of handmade bamboo paper a year. Some was used for sanitary purposes and wrapping, but much was processed into spirit money for sale in Fujian and southeast Asia. Upriver came salt, a few
foreign goods, and many objects of daily use. The most important of these was *tubu* cotton cloth, much of it made in Tong’an, Fuzhou, or further afield. Our retrospective tour of women’s lives begins in this valley, across the bay from Xiamen, in Tong’an County. Its capital, Tong’an, had for generations been a hub in a wide-ranging domestic and international system of production and trade.

*Tong’an County*

The sound of home in coastal Tong’an County villages is the delicate tinkle of chickens foraging in piles of tiny oyster shells. Heaps of them stand among the houses, testimony to the labor of girls who pick the meats from the hard parts for the local oyster-processing industry. “You pick *haili* from the day you are born,” said women, old and young. Little girls do most of the work, nowadays for three *mao* per mason jar, before the wars for one cash (the smallest available coin) per ricebowlful. Girls have been picking oysters as long as elderly people remember; the brick houses built with remittances from sojourners to the Nanyang are mortared with lime from the burned shells. Picking is boring and poorly compensated work, and ruins the hands for fine handicraft. Still, it is not as effortful in this alternatingly bonechilling and sauna-like climate as “going up to the mountains and down to the sea” to collect fuel and rake the tideflats for crabs and clams. When they have the labor and equipment to do so, a few men cooperate to salt batches of up to one thousand *jin* of oysters, pack them in large ceramic vats for which the region is famous, and take them by boat to Xiamen. In the old days, a byproduct salty liquid was sold to traders who retailed it as a condiment to poorer folks inland.

Oyster picking is a classic “light labor” occupation, but one that was not compatible with the footbinding of all little girls for life. An abundance of oysters was seasonal; cooperative groups of men with suitable equipment to share had to come together to process large quantities of them; families wanted their girls to be able to harvest the mucky tide flats for all kinds of shellfish, not only to sit at home cleaning oysters; and daughters might well end up married into interior villages with no labor-intensive seafood processing to absorb labor and subsidize tiny feet.

Another form of light labor for Tong’an girls, however, was important in both coastal and inland villages. Before the turn of this century, local people devoted some of their little agricultural land to the growing of opium. They now insist it was grown mostly for local and medicinal use; but when the government cracked down in the 1930s, their stored supplies lasted into the 1940s. Both women and men scratched and scraped the drug from poppy seedpods, but young daughters were considered especially suited to the task.

Not even opium brought riches, if village architecture is any evidence. Fishing was not aimed at production for market, since boats were small, and dared not go far offshore where the best fishing lay. The big houses and lineage halls
that still dot this coast were built with remittances from men seeking their fortunes in southeast Asia.

With young men disproportionately absent, women worked more in agriculture—an occupation that makes a poor match with footbinding. The tendencies of agriculture and high-value work for girls in oysters and opium were contradictory: both light and heavy forms of labor were available for girls, but neither was a full-time occupation. Textiles tipped the balance, giving even poor villages in Tong’an year-round girls’ work, and high rates of late footbinding.

By the 1880s, coastal villages within easy distance of Xiamen might be expected to have given up handicraft production of cloth in favor of the purchase of machine-made materials from Manchester, Bombay, or Shanghai. Surprisingly, evidence that the classic female tasks of spinning and weaving persisted much later is still abundant in the Tong’an area today. Homemade cloth is most visible in the form of the long shawls used for carrying babies. Even in urbane Xiamen, I spotted indigo and white checkered baby slings. In the Tong’an countryside they were everywhere, and from many eras. A workshop still produces them, handspun and handwoven. I saw them for sale in markets and in the hands of happy maternal grandmothers preparing the traditional gift for a daughter’s new baby. I chased women on streets and at temples to ask who had made the faded and sometimes tattered slings cradling their beautifully dressed infants. Handmade baby slings, with different patterns in each subregion of the Minnan area, were made by women for their daughters, or passed on to them from their mothers’ looms. The loving tie persists, and with it ubiquitous traces of an important female occupation.

Sentiment-laden baby slings are not the only evidence of a former handicraft textile industry. My chic-in-Beijing Chinese batik jacket brought spontaneous comments from older women about its similarity to the printed quilt covers formerly made in Tong’an. Ordinary, everyday tubu was worn by most rural people into the 1940s, and local weaving was still common into the 1930s. On learning that I liked to see it, old women turned out their sewing baskets, their stores of bedding, their carefully preserved dowry aprons, even their jacket linings to show me different degrees of fineness, and to pay tribute to their mothers’ and grandmothers’ skill. Weaving was indoor, high-value work, plainly linked in local culture to footbinding. On several occasions, when I asked a woman if someone had been able to weave, the reply came back, unprompted: “No, she didn’t have bound feet.”

From asking dozens of women (and men, about their kinswomen) whether they, or their mothers, or grandmothers, or mothers-in-law had spun or woven cotton, I conclude that about one-third of the women born just around 1900 were active weavers of homespun yarn. Presumably, for a very long time, Tong’an women of ordinary means had woven varying combinations of yarn spun by their daughters from homegrown or purchased raw cotton, and by Zhe-
jiang or Jiangxi girls. Machine-spun yarn began to displace local and Jiangnan homespun by 1900.

Spinning, not weaving, is the key to this historic shift; weaving persisted much longer in Tong’an, as I have shown. While weaving was a skilled task mostly undertaken by married women on their own looms, girls of five or six could learn to spin, and become expert at it by age seven or eight. Spinning is extremely labor-intensive and, by Sichuan informants’ accounts, extremely boring. A weaver needs from six to forty spinners to keep her busy full time, depending on the fineness of the thread, so spinning was a bottleneck which gave little girls’ labor time considerable implicit value. When fuel-driven spinning machines began to generate cosmic quantities of yarn, costing virtually nothing over the value of the raw material, that labor’s value began to evaporate.

The increasing redundancy of little spinners precipitated a crisis in foot-binding, I believe. This crisis is apparent in figures collected by Professor Shi Yilong for his three closely clustered Tong’an villages, included in Table 1. For the living generations, of 139 women over sixty-five (in 1990–1991), 68 percent had never been bound. Thirty-two percent had been bound, but virtually all had had their feet let out, usually shortly after marriage. Their average age at binding was 10.26 years—late by more general Chinese standards, but early in Fujian. We can compare these figures with those from 138 of these women’s mothers, who exemplify the turn-of-the-century division of labor. Only eight percent of them were never bound, and 50 percent were never unbound. We see a precipitous drop-off in the proportion of footbound women in the late 1920s, from a situation where women, employed in a variety of light labor, had been bound at the rate of 92 percent.

The disappearance of footbinding in Tong’an was spread over two generations at least. Although the rapidly adopted machine yarn threw girls out of work as hand-spinners, distant textile factories did not easily destroy home weaving, as foreign trade commissions lamented (Ronaldshay 1908). The cultural norm that a marriageable girl should be footbound was supported by the persistence of weaving as typical married women’s work. Footbinding was still economically compatible with the homebound situation of a weaving wife. Compromising, mothers bound fewer of their daughters, and bound them later, in preparation for marriage “for the mother-in-law to see.” As machine-woven cloth began to flood the market in the 1930s, even married women sought other sources of income when these were available. Most alternatives required more mobility, demanded more outdoor labor, and allowed more comfort than the preindustrial labor regime. By the early 1930s, very few Tong’an girls were being bound.

Nanjing County

On a shallow and unnavigable fork of the Jiulong River about sixty very rugged kilometers from Zhangzhou lies a small basin of stunning beauty. For interior
Minnan, its arable space is large and productive: big enough for lineages to fight viciously over (even into the 1980s!), yet not big enough to bring the full power of the state into permanent residence. Evidence of recent attempts to include this valley in the Chinese imperium are everywhere, from the rows of uninhabited Great Leap Forward housing to the fragments of the military base that suppressed renewed feuding during the Cultural Revolution, to the occasional faded slogan—*Da dao ziben zhuyi* ("Fight capitalism")—on outhouse walls. But local wars long predate the revolution. Defensive *tulou*, earthen fortress-villages, are scattered over the landscape, and interviews seem always to turn to the subject of how the dominant lineage became so powerful as to terrorize all the other nearby surnames. By comparison with the live-and-let-live Tong’an lineages, whose wealth came from overseas, the families of this valley seemed more like aggressive tribes.

The danger of rape or kidnapping may have been one reason for the low levels of footbinding that characterized this basin. Women working away from village centers were often at risk, and might need to run. Additionally, women’s labor was needed in agriculture because of men’s intensive political-military commitments. Lack of labor was an enduring problem. Despite abundant water, rich arable land, and a mild climate, paddy was rarely double-cropped here, old men said, because of labor shortages. Spinning and weaving may never have been much practiced locally. Only one woman out of the dozens I asked remembered her mother spinning—and this informant herself was eighty-four years old. Most people wore handwoven tubu even down to the 1970s, but no one knew where it was made.

People’s adamant refusal to explain how the cash to buy cloth was earned awoke in me an unconfirmable suspicion that opium had underwritten a late-nineteenth century flush of prosperity and increased the number of reasons for local lineages to fight over land. Girls and women did heavy cropping work, not only the light opium-collecting of a poppy harvest. There seemed to be few other forms of light labor that could be done in the safety of the home. In consequence, relatively few families bound their daughters’ feet.

Among Dr. Zhou Xianghe’s 142 informants, 91 percent had never been bound; of their 137 mothers, 44 percent had never been bound—the exact inverse, among these “traditional” paddy-growers, of the situation among poor Tong’an fisherfolk. The average age at binding of the living informants was 12.6 years. One eighty-seven-year-old told me, still outraged, that her mother-in-law had insisted on her being bound at twenty-one, after she was married and no longer worked in the fields!

As will be seen in Table 1, there is a marked distinction between the first of the Nanjing sites and the other two in rates of footbinding, especially in the mothers’ generation. This is due to sharp differences in wealth and status between the first community, where lineage power resided, and neighboring villages, whether or not they belonged to the dominant lineage. Powerful landlord
families were more likely to keep daughters and wives uneconomically safe at home, unlike their hard-pressed tenants, who needed all their family labor.

In this corner of Nanjing County, we see a classically agrarian region with a single, easily monopolized commercial crop. Life meant hard fighting for men, and hard labor for everyone but a small class of powerful families. The unmarried daughters and wives of ordinary households were expected to join in that labor. But for families that could dispense with a girl’s fieldwork, binding made possible potentially life-saving elite alliances. Local myth makes much of the power of high-ranking daughters-in-law in lineage relations. In one famous case, the agnates of a peasant princess shamed her marital lineage into building a major aqueduct, still in use, so that the young lady would not have to carry water.

**Hua’an County**

Halfway up the main Jiulong valley, this hilly land is hard to work, poor for paddy though excellent for sweet potatoes. Farming for staples was still the rule in the communities I visited with Dr. Zheng Ling. Except for small quantities of sugar, Hua’an had little agricultural surplus in the first half of this century. Here, in the very heart of Minnan, wage-labor, much of it done by women, supported most families until the revolution.

By estimate of former traders, three thousand tons of hand-made bamboo paper were annually transported through parts of Hua’an down the Jiulong, from their production sites in the mountains further west. Dr. Zheng Ling has determined that levies of paper by the late imperial government were a principal stimulus to paper making in hard-to-reach Minxi. The government’s share was carried “to Beijing” (north, at least) by porters, who were paid from Fujian provincial revenues as part of the province’s obligations to the center. In a region furred with bamboo and abundant in clean processing water, only labor limited paper production. Paper surplus to the government levy found eager markets downriver and, via Xiamen, south across the sea.5

Transport was complex and labor-intensive, with navigable stretches of the Jiulong River linked by steep portage routes. Carrying trails did not follow the river or keep to a grade; they went as the crow flies, straight up and down any hills that lay between pickup and laydown stations. Moving paper from its source to where the river was reliably navigable required facilities for bulking, breaking, and storage, including four warehouses capable of protecting four to five thousand jin; brokers, mostly a single regional lineage monopolizing the commercial profits; a fleet of 166 boats from Zhangzhou, loading up to ten thousand jin; and relays of porter-villagers from four countries. Since brokers profited or lost by their timeliness, and because the river was only sporadically high enough, labor was sometimes at a premium. In the 1930s, the wages for carrying one hundred jin between two staging posts (a distance of only a few kilometers, but much of it very hard going) were five or six mao when the boats...
were waiting, and only two or three if they had not yet arrived. For the same wage, the porters then carried daily goods (cloth, salt, oil, and the like) back to merchants in Hua’an. The dominant lineage took most of the profits from this trade as well, making them rich enough to construct and control the Hua’an docks and found a huiguan in Zhangzhou.

Brokers preferred men carriers who could handle whole hundred-jin bundles (strong men sometimes carried two), without the need for breaking and rewrapping. Women could rarely manage more than sixty to seventy jin, which made it necessary to break bundles. Since time mattered, however, women could usually get work if they wanted it, and, my informants say, most women did.

“We started carrying at the age of this one over here,” an eighty-year-old told me, pointing to a wispy girl of ten, “and we carried, pregnant or not, keeping up with the men. I gave birth on the trail once—that was a mess!” she laughed. “But it paid better than anything else, and was less boring than weaving.”

“There was plenty of weaving around here in my mother’s time, but no spinning. Mother always bought yarn at the market, and many people just bought cloth. Only women in rich families wove. They had bound feet, of course,” said a woman of seventy. An eighty-four-year-old remembered her spinning grandmother, who had married here from a small cotton-growing area. “Even there, though, not everyone spun. Yarn was easy to buy.” No one had heard of importing raw cotton to spin locally: “We had carrying; that paid better.” When there was no paper to carry, entrepreneurial women sprouted sweet potatoes for seed and carried huge loads of them to villagers at higher altitudes who wanted to get a jump on the growing season.

Everywhere I have interviewed them, in both Fujian and Sichuan, women spoke with enthusiasm about the wages they had earned by portering, as opposed to the returns for the tedious, house-bound occupations they might otherwise have had. A paved motor road and a railroad came through Hua’an in 1953, putting an end to most carrying, and women spoke regretfully of their lost opportunities. Yet the physical costs of carrying were high. In Fujian and Sichuan areas where women had carried as girls, older women were about four feet in height, and men rarely reached the five-foot level. Women from communities where female porterage was not the custom often expressed horror at the obvious rigors of this life.

Unsurprisingly, 89 percent of Dr. Zheng’s 145 informants had never had bound feet. In two of her sites, over 95 percent were natural-footed. In the third, only 58 percent were never bound. This site, very close to Hua’an city, had fewer portering opportunities and many more chances to work in town, providing services for the floods of porters. In the time of these women’s mothers, only nine percent of 128 women had never been footbound, however.

Had portering for women become much more common within this century? Perhaps. It is clear that textile work dropped off suddenly, that spinners were
not needed, and that weavers were usually wives in more prosperous families. But portering may not have been precluded by the Hua’an pattern of footbinding, which was late (first binding in our informants came at an average age of 14.4) and limited. The older generation women who remained footbound all their lives generally had received only a very partial binding, with minimal effects on their feet. In their mothers’ generation, too, binding had been superficial, “except on rich women.”

Even so, coincident traditions of portage and handicraft textile work may have made for especially hard choices when it came to a daughter’s footbinding. Once late nineteenth-century imports of yarn and cloth had made spinning a less rational use of girls’ labor time, they spent more and more premarital working years in carrying. Hua’an women achieved menarche at approximately seventeen years of age. Those most fully engaged in porterage thus would spend seven years—from the beginning age of ten, as indicated earlier—until they were physiologically ready for marriage, in the carrying trade, many of them returning to it after marriage. Pushing a girl’s footbinding to a later age, and binding more loosely, was the local compromise.

Hua’an women provided a normative dimension to this process as well. The culturally appropriate age for footbinding was ten, despite the fact that many women who stated this norm had been bound much later themselves, as had most of the women around them. Ten years of age may have marked the choice point of an earlier generation. Would the girl—at ten, big enough to do heavy work, but too young to bear children—be an outdoor or an indoor worker while she waited for marriage? By the 1930s, we see in Hua’an a pattern of work for women in which prosperous, peri-urban communities still bind half their daughters’ feet, but do so late and briefly, to “make brides of them.” Prior to marriage, and for many poorer women after marriage as well, girls and women were an important source of labor for regional industry, and of income for their families.

INTER-SITE COMPARISONS

Information on proportions and ages of footbinding for the three sites discussed above is summarized in Table 1. When we compare the generation of our informants, and draw such inferences as are possible from their accounts of their mothers’ and mothers-in-law’s lives, the hypothesis that the decline of home textile production may have strongly affected girls’ lives is supported.

In Tong’an, where spinning and weaving were common in the very recent past, where other light tasks such as oyster picking absorbed much young female labor, where there was little agricultural land, and where boat fishing was forbidden to women, 32 percent of living informants had been footbound during their lives, and 92 percent of their mothers’ generation had been footbound. The footbound informants’ average age at binding was 10.3 years, or 1.7 years lower than the Fujian average. In Hua’an, with portering rather than oyster picking as the alternative to a disappearing textile tradition, 17 percent of liv-
Percent of Informants and Mothers from Three Fujian Sites (Tong’an, Nanjing, and Hua’an) by Footbound Condition and Average Age at Binding

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ing informants and 91 percent of their mothers had been footbound. The average age at binding was an extraordinary 14.6 years.

Nanjing looks very different. Only 9 percent of living informants and 56 percent of their mothers had ever been footbound, and their average age at footbinding was a near-average (for Fujian) 12.6 years.
We do not see here a simple spatial continuum of downriver cosmopolitanism and upriver conservatism, or disparity between “maritime, commercial” and “continental, agrarian” syndromes. Hua’an is a regional hub; Nanjing is not. Nanjing is far closer to Zhangzhou by preindustrial travel time than Hua’an. Hua’an women who lived in places as hard to reach as our Nanjing villages had a higher commitment to footbinding during the years when many of them produced their own textiles. Nanjing elders, by contrast, remember virtually no spinning and weaving or other light labor for women—only unremitting agriculture and fuel carrying, with footbinding the “privilege” of elite women.

CONCLUSION
In each of these locales, as in a dozen more for which I have comparable survey and interview evidence, footbinding responded to two kinds of pressures on households. One was the need to maintain the patrilineal proprieties. These placed a family not only in a continuum of social esteem, but in a tributary mode of production of which social esteem is only one component. In a tributary hierarchy, statuses are positions with specific claims not only to prestige, but to property, over kinfolk, and in legal cases. The bodies and labor-power of unmarried daughters were allocated absolutely to their parents to use for the good of the patricorporation. Footbinding (although it was many other things as well) was a mechanism of labor discipline, employed to teach the playful child that obedience in unpleasant tasks was inescapable. Even one’s body was not one’s own.

Parents made use of their power to secure to themselves and their patrilineal descendants the claims allowed them by their status in the hierarchy: the right to pass on property through equal male partible inheritance, for example; or to dispose of a daughter as a properly wedded wife, rather than as a concubine or bondservant. For whatever tangled historical reasons, footbinding gave girls a powerful claim to be married “up” a bit in the local hierarchy. Tributary imperatives defined the domain assumptions of daily life.

Within late imperial Chinese domain assumptions, a niche was permitted for commodity production—a petty capitalist mode. Households ideally deployed their labor to take advantage of both market mechanisms and tributary claims in order to further family interest. In some parts of China—and the southeast coast is the extreme case—market pressures put adherence to tributary imperatives at considerable risk. There, in the pursuit of petty capitalist livelihoods that relied heavily on young female labor, the Chinese invented dramatic variants of marriage for their daughters (Wolf and Huang 1980; Stockard 1985). Footbinding, too, was sensitive to the demand for different kinds of youthful female labor. We do not see a pattern in which poor girls have unbound feet so that they can work, and rich ones have bound feet and lives of leisure. The kind of work, depending on differing uses of the growing child’s strength, cognitive skills, and acceptance of discipline, is the critical factor.
Most of the labor performed by Chinese women was not wage-work, but work done behind the veil of kinship. Women worked as daughters and wives, or as semi-adopted bondservants or partly married concubines, not as employees. Their labor belonged to kin seniors whose tributary rights over them were nearly unrestricted. This Chinese labor regime was very different from that which emerged around western capitalism, embedded as the former was in a kinship/gender system that until very recently permitted an extraordinary degree of control over young female laborers.

Changes in politics, ideologies, and almost invisible industrial developments discouraged footbinding in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries. That seems obvious. What is still occluded, however, is how those notions were translated into reality through the mundane practices of everyday life. This can be understood only by accumulating and examining sufficient, appropriate information from the most accurate of available sources, women who were at risk of footbinding. Asking ordinary people of both sexes about the work that sustained their lives launches our inquiries onto the broadest and richest currents of Chinese culture.

NOTES

1. To prevent unnecessary confusion in this abbreviated description of China’s modes of production, I should note that my use of “tributary” here somewhat resembles the Chinese Marxist idea of a Chinese feudal system, not the sinological usage that refers to imperial exchanges of political gifts with border peoples.

2. My fieldnotes for Taiwan and Fujian, where high brideprices and scanty dowries usually resulted in gains by the bride’s parents, contain numerous examples of rural or small-town families early in this century who used a daughter’s brideprice to buy land, a house, or a plough cow, or to set up in business.

3. These elite Hakka women, of course, did no agricultural labor. But they are honored by their descendants as diligent and talented cloth-makers; Shanghang women showed me examples of their beautiful work.

4. Tulou are usually associated with Hakka people, but these Nanjing villagers disclaimed any Hakka connection or ancestry. Widely distributed in this middle-Jiulong region, the earthen fortress-houses have long saved Hokkien as well as Hakka skins.

5. My thanks to Dr. Zheng for this summary of part of her research.

REFERENCES


