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Footbinding, handspinning, and the modernization of little girls

Abstract

The differential distribution and disappearance of footbinding in a sample of nearly ten thousand older women in several provinces offer insight into Chinese political economy. Footbinding ratios index varied uses of female labor in the late imperial and early republican periods, and reveal kinship/gender aspects of Fujian's complex handicraft and commercial economy under early industrialism.

Introduction

Between ages five and seven, children begin to have the strength and understanding to perform useful tasks. Between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, most Fujian girls achieved menarche. During that able-bodied but not-yet-fertile decade – a quarter of an average life-span in those times – girls could work at almost any task without running the risk of illegitimate pregnancy. And work they did. This paper explores how footbinding was implicated in that work regime.

The view that women of China's old society cooked, cleaned, and took care of children, while men supported their families with food and money is as widely held in Fujian as in any part of China. It is also just as incorrect, as distorting of our understanding of economic history, as it is elsewhere. Fujian's coastal villages are layered with the material evidence of women's work that brought cash into their households. The most obvious of these layers is the heaps of shell found everywhere, and the burned-shell mortar that unobtrusively cements the province's handsome vernacular architecture. Shellfish-gathering is work for women and children – especially girls, as are the winkling out of the edible parts, and their drying and conversion into sauce. At the turn of the century, on a good day, a girl could pick two *jin* of oysters, exchangeable for 100 *jin* of rice. That rice would feed her for three months, or her whole family for several weeks. Another village woman reminisced about her Tong'an county childhood:

'Father took me to Xiamen once, when I was quite small. I saw girls with tiny feet, in lovely shoes, and I wanted my feet bound to be beautiful like them. I begged Mother to bind me, and she agreed, saying that if I could stand the pain, a rich man might marry me, because I had a pretty face too. We started. It was really terrible – I hadn't imagined that it would hurt so much. I changed my mind, but Mother said that we had started, and so must continue. Then Father came home from another trip to Xiamen, and was angry. 'What's the point of this foolishness for a fisherman's daughter?' he said. 'This girl cannot sit here eating until we find a rich man for her to marry! Take those bindings off and send her out to collect oysters. What will I sell if she sits at home?' It was a big fight, but at last we listened to Father'.

This answer, and the rest of her responses during the hour we talked, epitomizes the themes around which my data on foot-binding group themselves. We hear about the harsh labor regime rural life might require of women. We hear family conflict: between mother and daughter, who is in real and constant pain; and between mother and father, who want the best for their child, but do not agree on how to define what is best. We hear the weighing of a trade-off extremely important to the parents of Chinese daughters: between giving girls better marriage prospects by binding their feet, versus using her natural-footed labor power to the fullest for her natal family's benefit.

We hear too, if we listen properly, a silence

on whether footbinding might be the object of concern in the world beyond the village and its muddy tideflats. In this vivid memory from the 1920s, there is no mention of a new social order where footbinding no longer fits a girl for a better future. In the experience of this woman, and of hundreds of others I have interviewed recently, the value of their labor was weighed in agonizing calculation against the opportunities for hypergamous marriage that bound feet promised. Labor usually won.

The women on whom this study is based spoke constantly to me of the contradictory requirements of status and labor that governed their growing up. Heavy work is accorded little esteem in traditional Chinese society, yet women's labor was the key to most of the best methods through which producer-class people earned household cash income. Female labor, an almost free good to household heads, was essential in the production of silk, cotton, ramie, hemp, and other textile products; of tea, paper, opium, and tobacco; of the oils derived from nuts, peanuts, and cottonseed; of meat and eggs; and of pickled vegetables, sea-food sauces, and other forms of processed foods.

In many parts of China, girls' products, or earnings from the sale of their products, made the difference between family comfort and family privation. Adele Fielde, a sensitive long-term observer of the Chaozhou area in the late nineteenth century, collected household budgets showing that the value of the family's home-spun, home-woven, and home-sewn clothing was roughly equivalent to the entire value of the household's agricultural means of production – not including land, but including draft animals and tools (Jamieson, 1888: 114). A Fuzhou tea-processer born in 1917 described that work for me as so well paid that it enabled some daughters to act as sons in family economies.

'We earned so much money that our parents let us stay home and not marry. Women sometimes bought houses, or they supported their parents until the old people died, then inherited their house and land. I myself actually married at about the usual time, but women who waited and inherited property sometimes married men they chose themselves – sometimes much younger men, men without money. No one looked down on us; we had dowries, you see. Tea processers dressed well, wore flowers in our hair, and were really proud of ourselves for our high skills and incomes'.

Not all women were as aware of their contributions. Working out as a servant in the mid-1930s earned fifty cash a month. That was 'only enough to keep ten people for a few days', as my informant saw it. 'Women weren't worth much'. Because she ate without cost at her employer's, however, she actually supported both herself and another family member with this work. Women porters neither carried nor earned as much as men, but could support small families on their earnings; paper-makers and spirit-money makers at least earned their own way. Here and there on Fujian's rough terrain, cotton grew and women spun and wove it, an honorable fall-back position for widows with children and a little land. Often the fruits of women's work were their families' principal sources of cash.

Yet to shine in the marriage market, girls needed more than a reputation for hard work. Paradoxically, they should remain secluded while still giving evidence of discipline and earning capacity. Footbinding provided that evidence. Women with successfully bound feet (and their mothers) were credited with having accomplished something difficult and, even today, admirable. I have interviewed a half-a-dozen women who, as children, bound their feet themselves. An elite Xiamen matriarch, who broke her own bones at six, had the smallest feet I have yet seen. She was an extraordinary woman, and must have been an amazing little girl. The women cadres present at the interview did not ridicule or pity her; they admired her strength and determination. And her four-inch patent-leather Maryjanes were eloquent testimony that she had done no heavy work in all her eighty years.

The empirical evidence[1]

For untold generations, footbinding was a sensitive indicator of gender, household, and economic dynamics. But empirical evidence for its existence, its variations, and its context is extremely limited. In 1991 and 1992, I set up, tested, and supervised a survey of 5,000 women of 65 and older in collaboration with the Sichuan Provincial Women's Federation. With the Xiamen City Women's Federation, I did a parallel survey of 830 Fujian women. A cooperative project with scholars of Xiamen University have made available information on a further 3,600 similar women. From these and other sources, I am beginning to fill in a picture of regionally varied footbinding practices, of the economic role of women's work in the first four decades of this century, and of how changes in that work affected – indeed, I hope to argue, caused – the decline of footbinding. Here, I focus on the general argument I am developing with these data, and primarily on those from an especially detailed 60-women set I collected in Xiamen.

My goal in undertaking this work is to explore a custom which was both a key element in Chinese women's lives and a strongly distinguishing feature of Han culture; and to test arguments developed elsewhere about the nature of the Chinese kinship/ gender system, and its part in late imperial political economy (Gates, 1996). In this brief paper, I sketch a political-economic outline of the problem, leaving detailed correlations and cultural implications for other publications.

[1] The Sichuan and Fujian surveys were accomplished with funds from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation's program on the causes and consequences of violence and aggression, and in cooperation with the Women's Federations of Sichuan Province and Xiamen City, who have my thanks. I am grateful too to Dr. Zheng Ling, formerly of Xiamen University, to Professor Shih Yilong and Dr. Zhou Xianghe of Xiamen University, for enabling me to interview in their field-sites.

Explanations for footbinding

Footbinding has been explained in a number of ways: sado-masochistic erotic appeal based on exaggerated gendering for strength/ weakness oppositions; management of ethnic distinctions; social emulation of elites; the maintenance of gender hierarchy; maintenance of parental authority. None of these hypotheses accounts for the remarkably regionalized patterns of footbinding. In the late nineteenth century, footbinding was near-universal on many parts of the North China Plain, and in North Taiwan. Observers believed it to be highly class-dependent in the Guangdong region and the Jiangnan. Accounts for Yunnan and the far northwest show it varying, with some precision, as a Han/non-Han boundary marker. For many areas, we simply have no idea how many girls were bound, and under what circumstances. In Sichuan, my survey shows percentages of bound-footedness that ranged from a high of 82.8 in Lezhi county to a low of 43.2 in Min Shan county (Gates, 1995); Fujian figures have a comparable range. This striking local variability precludes traditional arguments based primarily on the erotic appeal or status-enhancing effects of bound feet.

Ethnic identity assertion is surely a powerful predictor of footbinding under some circumstances. Women tended to be footbound in high ratios in regions where Han and non-Han, or Hakka and non-Hakka, coexist. As Norma Diamond (1988) has shown in a brilliant paper, those boundaries were fraught with life-threatening tension even when they were not literally zones of war. North Taiwan at the turn of the century was just such a Han-Aborigine frontier; Hokkien women there were bound at the rate of 95 per cent. The sharpness of the Hokkien/Hakka boundary, expressed in part through footbinding differential, makes the same point in Fujian. The effect of ethnic confrontations in creating and maintaining high levels of footbinding may well account for a great deal of the observable local variation. It cannot account for the high rates of footbinding believed to have been common in ethnically homoge-

neous regions such as eastern Sichuan or North China.

That variations in footbinding practice might be shaped by varying demand for the labor of girls has often been suggested, most recently by Fred Blake (1993), but never tested empirically. Those proposing an economic cause for the custom generally assume that agricultural labor governs its distribution. My evidence shows that such an argument is misguided. In many local contexts, female labor was of less value in primary extraction than in processing. In densely-populated areas, male labor-power was sufficient for farming. Excess female labor, especially that of unmarried girls, could often be put to better use in high-value work suitable for the footbound. Clamming, paddy-field agriculture, and porterage did not fit the bill; they all required natural feet. A number of other important Fujian occupations did, however, especially home textile production, tea picking, processing, and packing, tobacco and opium work, and paper- and spirit-money making. Of these, I have focussed on home textile production as a widespread feature of many Chinese regional economies, and one that fit perfectly with footbinding.

Fujian was famous for *shabu*, 'grasscloth', a light, lustrous hemp or ramie fabric for summer wear by the rich, and, in the 19th century, for export. Ordinary people wore cotton *tubu*, handspun and handwoven, much of which was purchased from the Jiangnan. Yet cotton spinning and weaving too were by no means unusual in Fujian. For those who seek it, evidence for the persistence of handicraft textiles in the province is ubiquitous. Most visibly, handicraft cotton cloth is still made for the baby-slings many rural women use. The distinctive checks and stripes of this traditional gift from a mother to her daughter's first child tell the practiced eye exactly where the woman hails from. Travels in Fujian reveal many other traces of recently flourishing local textile production. In Minxi, once-elegant hemp mosquito nets moulder in corners, replaced by less effective but cheaper and more stylish machine netting. A superb indigo-dyed cotton quilt-cover, marriage gift from a fifty year old Shanghang woman's highly skilled mother was displayed to me as a family heirloom. The revolutionary museums that sprinkle old liberated areas are crammed with homespun uniforms and bedding. And everywhere, women casually decorticate fiber with a thumbknife to make coarse thread for sewing shoe soles and mending equipment.

Most helpful in my quest to uncover the history of Fujian textile production, however, has been direct inquiry of my informants. As part of our Women's Federation survey, we asked women whether their dowry had included machine cloth, and, if not, when they had first worn such cloth. It was plain that weaving remained an important task for women in both coastal and interior regions of Fujian, and that much of the cloth which, along with salt, was carried inland in exchange for the paper that was carried out, was hand-woven – *somewhere* – until the 1950s. The need for Minnan girls to spin and women to weave common cloth for use and sale persisted longer than urban elites might imagine. With it persisted the conditions that made footbinding a desirable option for a family with daughters.

Families, female labor and modes of production

We may turn at this point to some recent thoughts on the significance of women's work in China's largest pre-capitalist industry, the making of textiles. Cloth rivalled grain in importance. Philip Huang summarizes the work of Wu Chengming and others which reveals 'the exchange of cotton cloth for grain accounted for two-thirds (69.9 per cent) of the total volume of trade on the eve of the Opium War' (Huang, 1989: 90). Unlike luxury goods such as tea, opium, and fine handicrafts, textiles were an item of mass consumption as necessary to life as food.

Philip Huang (1985, 1990) stresses the role that family production has continuously played from the Ming until the present, with only brief interruption between the later

1950s and the late 1970s. He insists – quite correctly – that during the Ming and Qing, agricultural commercialization in China grew ever more elaborated without leading in the direction of capitalism. Rather, he says, it brought growth without development – 'involution' in the sense in which Geertz applied it to Indonesian agriculture. In this, of course, Huang is restating, in a highly focussed way, a position first enunciated by Mark Elvin (1973), who described the involutional relationship of commerce, labor intensification, and population growth as a 'high-level equilibrium trap'. Huang also agrees with Chao Kang (1987): an increasing population forced more intensive use of land; handicrafts grew up as ways to earn extra income; families needed all the labor they could produce for peak agricultural use, and for handicraft production; families were the indigenous 'firms' or production units of the economic system; and, because the workers were kinfolk, not hired laborers, large numbers of sometimes unnecessary workers had to be supported even when it was not rational in capitalist terms to maintain them.

Both Huang and Chao argue strongly for the economic role of the kinship corporation – the *jia* – as the characteristic Chinese production unit, and for the cumulative significance of the small-scale exchanges that enmeshed all these many households in a highly commercialized – but NOT capitalist – political economy. Huang, however, makes a further point of extreme importance. He shows how Ming/Qing handicraft cotton and silk production brought heavier and heavier workloads for women and children (Huang, 1990: 14). Even under early industrialization, 'low-paying work came to be absorbed by household auxiliary labor, especially of women. That economic involution, in turn, acted as a counterincentive to labor-saving capitalization' (ibid., 129).

Huang, then, agrees with what I have argued elsewhere (Gates, 1989), that historical shifts to family-based commodity production, especially of textiles, brought marked changes to women's lives – and to those of children as well. Confusingly, however, he insists that 'family farms were often burdened with surplus labor that they could not 'fire" (Huang, 1990: 70). This idea has been a central tenet in the analysis of Chinese economies at least since Weber; it remains the principal obstacle to a clear view of Chinese political economies.

Feminist scholars see the kind of petty commodity producer households Huang describes rather differently (Lem, 1991; Greenhalgh, 1994; Judd, 1994). Women and girls are not only controlled by male household heads in social and cultural ways. Their labor is appropriated by them in the interests of the agnatic corporation, and they receive less from the common pool of resources than males. In China, norms of filiality backed by state power stretched this control to its extreme. Kinship, feminist analysts point out, is perhaps the principal social mechanism for the reproduction of the gendered division of labor. It is also thus almost necessarily an area of contradiction, mystification, and ambiguity. Like households everywhere, Chinese households are arenas for struggles between women and men, juniors and seniors, over who will control whose labor and earnings.

In China, however, not only women's labor, but their persons, were at the disposal of kin seniors. Girls were reallocated to other households not only as adult brides, but in many other ways, as studies of foster daughter-in-law marriage, bondage, and prostitution reveal (Wolf and Huang, 1981; Gronewald, 1985; Jaschok, 1988; Jaschok and Meiers, 1994). Even married women were not nearly as secure in their household membership as Philip Huang and Chao Kang have assumed them to be (Wolf, 1995: chap. 8). Surplus family members could not be 'fired' exactly, but they could be disposed of in a variety of ways, especially in highly commercialized areas like turn-of-the-century Fujian and Taiwan. One quarter of all the women in my Fujian sample had been abandoned, sold, given away, or adopted.

Mothers sometimes bound their daughters' feet expressly to save them from such careers. A woman born in Jiangxi in 1917 was sold at

three to Fuzhou, where her foster-mother tried to 'make a lady of her' by binding her feet. The little girl protested so vigorously that the binding failed; she was resold to Xiamen at thirteen as a shophand. One informant was kidnapped by slavers, but found unsalable because of her bound feet; eventually her parents ransomed her. Often footbinding was interrupted if a girl's mother died young, or never instituted if she was last in a long line of sisters. Such girls might be sold, remaining big-footed *cabokan* doomed to marry – if at all – into poverty, or into a permanent semi-slave/semi-wifely status (Shaw, 1994).[2]

When industrial textiles invaded Fujian, and tea sales declined, bound-footedness ceased to be a hopeful option. My informants' tales illustrate how they moved into ever-heavier occupations, or felt increasingly worthless and burdensome to their natal families. The tide of human trafficking swept many of them away as children – natural-footed but de-skilled – into the pit of poverty.

Modernizing China's little girls – freeing their feet, educating them, and channeling their labor toward wage work – was powerfully impeded by the cultural brake of footbinding. Yet footbinding in turn depended on a preindustrial labor-regulation regime in which both girls' labor and persons were allocated to their parents to dispose of in the interests of the patrilineal household. By delineating the details of Fujian people's abandonment of footbinding – as I shall do in a more expansive format – we learn much about the gendered intricacies of work in a Chinese region better known for its commerce than for its products, for men's work than for women's.

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[2] There are some happy endings to these tales: Ms X (168), born in 1913 in Quanzhou, was footbound for only a day. She screamed so much that her opium-addicted gambler father stopped the binding. Her mother agreed, realizing the child would probably have to work to support herself. When her mother died, X was given out in adoption at 5 *sui* to be an adopted daughter-in-law. Her intended brother-husband went mad, however, so her kind foster-father took her to Xiamen and readopted her into the family of a good-hearted accountant. The brother-husband there was quite unlike his father, and took up with another woman. She thus felt justified in running away at thirty with her children, whom she supported by working as a servant in Xiamen and, for a time, in Hong Kong. She once considered Singapore as well. 'I worked hard, and minded my own business. My sons ought to be filial, and they are,' she concluded.