

Slave Girls, Families, and Cities in the Qing and Early 20th-century

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Abstract

Imperial China’s orthodox political theorists considered the family as the key institution mediating individuals’ relationship with the wider world. Although it was not regarded as the only important institution, it was seen as fundamental in a way that guilds, say, or neighborhood watch (*baojia*) units, or monasteries were not. Obligation to family had no rival, theoretically, among social claims, except perhaps the duty owed by educated men and trained soldiers to the dynasty. The potency of the family idea was such that many social groups organized themselves in ways that paralleled family structure and adopted the terminology of family relationships to frame the hierarchy of membership.

This was not the case, however, with cities in imperial China. During the Qing, unlike in early modern Europe, no “town fathers” presided over the business of urban governance. Individual cities certainly had distinct cultural reputations, gained for them by the artistry and social lives of their prominent residents, their landscapes, and their historic sites. But, in contrast to the family and lineage, cities were not understood as coherent social organizations. The “father-and-mother officials” (父母官) responsible for local governance were assigned to jurisdictions—counties and departments—that spanned expanses of fields and villages, as well as dense urban spaces. Their headquarters were always urban, but their domains were not. One result of this—as Arthur Wright pointed out long ago—was that theories about cities and urban space have little place in imperial Chinese thought.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, new conceptions of “the city” entered Chinese political discourse just as ideas about the nature and role of “the family” came to be vigorously contested. The conversations concerning both city and family tended to consider these institutions separately in the context of their respective relationships to “the nation.” Only rarely—and even then rather superficially—were families and cities considered in relation to each other. This phenomenon, which I will document to some extent in this paper, seems to me to stem in part from the strength of the family idea as a universal organizing principle, equally applicable in city and village, which survived the (often limited and ambivalent) May-Fourth-era attacks on it, although with some revision. The problem of the family was fundamental, people thought, because the family itself was fundamental. The problem of the city was of great concern to a much more limited set of people—people who generally maintained rather conservative ideas about the nature of families.

The weakness of the connections between the late-Qing and republican discourses of family and urban reform is illustrated, I believe, by one of the particular features of Chinese urban life in the first half of the twentieth century: the persistence of a market in slave girls (*binii*) throughout the late Qing and republican periods and the reluctance of social activists to challenge it. This paper represents my initial forays in understanding the history and significance of slave girls in imperial and 20th-century China. I begin with a brief review of debates about cities and families in the decades before and after the 1911 Revolution, and then turn to the arguments about the status of slave girl that surfaced at that time. The remainder of the paper travels back in time to consider what place domestic servants occupied in urban life, social thought, and literary culture before the late-Qing reform period, to shed light on the persistence of slave girls in cities during the Republic.

The impact of family organization on the development of trade and industry in China, although a subject of much dispute, has been reaffirmed recently in *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History* by the McNeills, father and son, who write: "In Muslim and Chinese society, members of a single, sometimes extended family managed most economic enterprises. The strength of family ties made it difficult or impossible to trust outsiders, thus limiting the scale of most undertakings." This paper is part of an ongoing effort to understand the strength of Chinese family ties, to whom they were extended, and how they affected urban life and the shape of cities in modern China.