

Revisiting the Distinction of Woman's Work and Womanly Work in the  
Proto-Industrialization of Jiangnan Textile Industry, 1600-1800

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Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century long-distance trade in China underwent great expansion accompanied by a regional division of labor among the different economic areas of China. As this nation-wide division of labor became both deeper and broader, many cities and towns in the Lower Yangzi region (the so-called Jiangnan area) emerged as centers of commerce and industry. The production of cotton, silk, agricultural crops, and other goods there and in the surrounding countryside was gradually promoted by the investment of merchant capital. With this input of capital, various kinds of merchants began to have an impact on the material life and work habits of craftsmen, peasants, and other people. If the investment of capital in such goods, unlike in western Europe after the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, did not lead to a factory system and mass production, its momentum still helped to reshape both late imperial China's economic organizations and its meaning of work in ways I wish to explore here, through the investigation of the topic of "men till, women weave" (nangeng nǚzhi) from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Jiangnan area.

There are at least two critical meanings could be affiliated to the topic of "men till, women weave". The first meaning bound up with this topic is that it reflects a significant political discourse being raised and polished since very early Chinese history. From the unification of Chinese Empire in the 221 B.C., officials and scholars had appreciated and highlighted the tenet that all men and women have to stick to

their own pertinent work: men have to plow in the field and women have to weave in the household. This political discourse aims to two basic targets: one is to ensure that people can earn their own livings, feed and clothe their families, and get away from participating any rebel against the dynasty; the other is to show the subjectivity both from men and women to the Emperor per se by way of paying their tax and tribute to the government.

The tenet of political meaning of “men till, women weave” thrived very well from 3th B.C. until the end of Chinese last dynasty at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century mainly because of the supports both from many related economic policies enacted by government and from the spread of this pertinent doctrine attached in dozens of classics perused and studied by almost every literati and scholars in imperial China. Under the influence of this political discourse, women’s work in China, as Francesca Bray has quite correctly noticed, was “classically defined as the making of textiles”; and hence “the inner quarters were identified not as a zone of dependence but as a site of essential productive activity, tying the household into the polity.”<sup>1</sup>

Another meaning affiliated to “men till, women weave” doctrine in Chinese history could be identified as the category of the evolution of economic organization. Along the development of commercialization and specialization in textile production from the end of the Song dynasty and reached its long-term boom from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century in China, merchant capital steadily consolidated its control over rural textile production, and the production of cloth made in urban workshops increased, as did the

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<sup>1</sup> Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1997, p.175.

size of the hired labor force.<sup>2</sup> Although the political discourse of the “men till, women weave” doctrine had its vitality, women’ work actually often included helping their husbands to till in the field because agricultural production consumes both the workforce of man and woman in a household. Until very late in probably the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there really appeared a prevailing household pattern of “men till, women weave” economy in some part of Jiangnan area, and hence evolved as a kind of most optimal economic organization in the development of Jiangnan rural textile industry.<sup>3</sup> The topic of “men till, women weave” differed its complex meaning between the political discourse and economic evolution.

This paper delves into the interesting interplay between the economic and political facets of the so-called “men till, women weave” topic, and tries to compare with some useful insights accompanied by the issue of “proto-industrialization” in early modern European history which highlights the variable factors from institution and culture that constituted the diversified economic changes in world history.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bray, p.178.

<sup>3</sup> 李伯重，〈從「夫婦並作」到「男耕女織」——明清江南農家婦女勞動問題探討之一〉、〈「男耕女織」與「半邊天」角色的形成——明清江南農家婦女勞動問題探討之二〉，二文都收入氏著《多視角看江南經濟史》，北京：三聯書店，2003，頁 269-288、289-314。

<sup>4</sup> Sheilagh C. Ogilvie and Markus Cerman edit, *European Proto-Industrialization*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.