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Revisiting the Women Factor in China's Economy, 1918-1931

(Cotton, Sex, and Silk Industry).

The first five decades of the twentieth century mark an era where China experienced an industrial revolution. Globalization of capitalism brought major changes in the Chinese economy.¹ Whereas China was initially characterized as a region that produced goods mostly to be used by its citizens, now the system changed and had numerous products being sent overseas to neighboring regions. In 1919, Chinese export products increased vehemently from a value of 486 in 1918 to 631 in 1919.² The production of goods and other services were now at the large-scale level making most sectors in China grow as an industry.³ The devastated First World War had destructed imports and exports activities among various regions. Europeans in their bid to rebuild their political, economic, and social institutions focused on domestic affairs.

The dramatic decline in imports created a hiatus for Chinese industrialization during the interwar period. As Europeans' demand for various products from China increased, there was a need for an increase in labor, which women became a major working force. The popular idiom in China “男人犁，女人编织: (men plow, women weave), which reflects traditional gender roles in Chinese societies changed over time. Women became the backbone of the new cotton, silk, and weaving industry. Besides, some women now took jobs which were initially set aside for men.⁴ By 1929, women were more than 60 percent of the industrial labor in Shanghai, the biggest city in China.⁵

¹ Barbara Molony, Janet Theiss, and Hyaeweol Choi, *Gender in Modern East Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2016),297.

² Hsiao, Liang-lin, *China's Foreign Trade Statistics, 1864–1949*, (Cambridge: Mass) 1974, 23–24.

³ *Ibid*,179-182.

⁴ *Ibid*,269

⁵ *Ibid*,297.

Although women were found to engage themselves in various sectors of the economy (cotton mills, silk, and the sex industry), the extent to which their involvement had a correlation with the economy is a gap in China's economic history.⁶ The research closer to this study is Kung and Daniel's "Women's contribution to the Household economy in pre-1949.⁷

China". Nonetheless, they focused on women's contributions towards the household economy with specialization on the farms neglecting their economic roles toward the nation as well as other industries such as the sex industry, cotton, and silk.⁸ This paper addresses the role of women in the textile industry (cotton, silk, and weaving) and the sex industry, how they contributed to both the household, and the nation's economy in both the North and the South during the interwar years.

Women in the Cotton Mills

Cotton became the most essential source of fiber in China from the early Ming period.⁹ Shanghai, the largest industrial region in China prior to the 1940s was dominated by cotton work and women were the most working force. During the early 1920s, cotton production grew from small-scale production to the level of industry and about 140,000 workers in Shanghai factories were in the cotton mills. Women in these Shanghai factories occupied diverse positions and played diverse roles in the production of cotton goods. By 1929, 84,270(76%) women worked in cotton spinning while 22,394(77%) women worked in cotton weaving. In the cotton industry, women oversaw mixing, carding, molding, roving, spinning, and reeling.¹⁰ From the mid-1920s, women

⁶ Ibid,211

⁷Ibid,210.

⁸ Ibid,210-238.

⁹Burton Pasternak, "The Sociology of Irrigation: Two Taiwanese Villages" in *Economic Organization in Chinese Society*, eds. W. E Willmott (Stanford: University Press, 1972), 210. ⁸ Ibid,297.

¹⁰Gail Hershatler, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949* (California: Stanford University Press, 1986),148.

dominated as the working force in most of the great industries in China. A survey in the early 1930s found that 72.9% of cotton mill workers in Shanghai were women. The survey discovered the numerous women who worked in the cotton mills received wages that supported their livelihood and that of their households.

Women were employed in the cotton industries to spin wool which was sold to carpet factories. Besides, women were employed to make wreaths and weave mats. Some women were also employed to sew the uniforms of the new warlord who arrived in Tianjin.¹¹ These activities of women contributed to the economy as taxes were paid by women workers, middlemen, factory owners, and European exporters which added to the nation's revenue while workers earned wages to support their livelihood thereby decreasing the poverty rate in China. Besides, the production of mats, wreaths, carpet, and other cotton products from Shanghai were exported to neighboring regions while some were sent to various market centers.¹² Chinese markets were dominated with these products and some middlemen travel from afar to purchase cotton goods on wholesale, so they can as well sell at a price in the various markets. The selling of products in the market centers boosted the Chinese economy as the middlemen purchased the goods, paid taxes and brought their products to China in their bid of acquiring the Chinese products. The payment of taxes by cotton middlemen traders as well as retailers increased China's revenue.¹³

Girls who started working to earn a wage were expected to contribute to the family income. The financial status of families pushed younger girls into cotton factories at an early age. The purpose was to get money to cater for themselves and their family. In an interview with a worker in the mills, Song Ermei, in Shanghai on November 11, 1980, she indicated:

¹¹ Ibid,43.

¹² Ibid,43-56

¹³ Ibid, 52-56

I entered the workforce as my mother withdrew. After my mother had worked at the cotton mill for some years, she became ill and quit the job. After my mother had quit the job I had to intervene to support the family since my mother had other children to care for.¹⁴

The contributions of women in Shanghai changed the perceptions of parents about daughters since they were now esteemed highly in families for their support to the family using their wages.¹⁵ On the other hand, women in the Northern sector of China experienced the industrial revolution in the later years and the percentage of women workers in the cotton mills were lesser than the women in South China. By 1929, only 9.14 % out of the total number of workers in Tianjin cotton mills were women.¹⁶ Comparatively, Shanghai had a larger industrial sector with a massive demand for workers in the textile industries, than Tianjin and this was the reason women workers were more in Shanghai than the cities in the North. The few industries that existed in Tianjin and other Northern cities were occupied by men leaving behind a lesser opportunity for women.¹⁷

In Tianjin, most women left the cotton mills after working for some years. The reasons for leaving the mills were varied which include: either the person decided to quit, was dismissed for long absenteeism, returned to their native town, suffered from illness or injury, dismissed for stealing, disobedience, fighting, or find another job she thinks was favorable than working in the cotton mills. Despite the fact that few women worked in the cotton industries that existed in the North, these women also contributed towards China's economy. Women were highly committed and their commitment to discharging their duties made some employers employ them since few of them could contribute effectively. Similar to women who existed in the South, women in the North

¹⁴ Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986),169.

¹⁵ *Ibid*,69.

¹⁶ *Ibid*,55.

¹⁷ *Ibid*,56.

earned wages as they work in the cotton mills. Women workers paid taxes out of the amount they earned, and the amount left was used to supplement the household economy.¹⁸

Women in Zhouzhi dominated textile work during the 1920s. Most of the textile works were done by women with few men occupying some positions in the textile works. Every Zhouzhi woman saw it as a demand to be equipped with how to spin cotton or twist hemp.¹⁹ In Zhouzhi, textile work was dominant and its contributions towards the economy gave it the prestige thereby pushing women to learn how to work in cotton works. A survey conducted in 2011 in Zhouzhi using elderly women who worked during the interwar years revealed most women (91%) had learned how to spin cotton when they were younger girls.²⁰ The heavy demand for homespun and handwoven cloth referred to as *cubu or rough cloth* led to the massive production of cotton products. Out of these producers were most women who played diverse roles. In places where the market was more competitive, women traders expanded their horizon and sold their products to the remote areas especially North of the Wei River where industrial activities were lesser.²¹ Furthermore, women in the cotton mills formed what became known as the sisterhood societies (*Jiemei hui*). The sisterhood was made up of women in the same workshop. These women are sworn to be banded together for protection and uphold the ethics of the group. The purpose was to assist each other in times of need. Every month, each sister contributes a quota which was set aside as an emergency fund or release to a sister in need. As women gained assistance from their coworkers, it helped in reducing the poverty rate since it enabled sisters to cater for their family

¹⁸ Ibid,58-59

¹⁹ Laurel Bossen et al., “Feet and Fabrication: Foot binding and Early Twentieth-Century Rural Women’s Labor in Shaanxi” *Modern China* 374 (2011): 355.

²⁰ Ibid, 355.

²¹ Ibid, 355-356.

and themselves.²² The main source of contributions in the sisterhood was the money earned by each sister. The assistance provided by the sisterhood boosted both the household economy and the economy of China households were free from economic pressure while the state was as well relieved from the burden of financially supporting various families through rehabilitation and other projects.²³ In an interview conducted by Emily Honig, Ningzhen stated the ideal purpose of the sisterhood formation was to assist each other financially:

Maybe four of us girls got together. Each month, when we got our wages, we would each donate a certain amount to the kitty. Then we would determine who needed the money the most that time. For example, it was very hard for us to buy a *qipao* in those days, a good blue one. So sometimes we would use the money to make a *qipao* for whichever person needed it. Or maybe someone would use (the money) to make a coat. If one of the members had family problems, like someone needed to see a doctor, or someone had died, they would use the money for that.²⁴

In terms of salary level, women were paid lesser than men although in some departments both sexes performed the same activities. It was only in the slabbed and roving department that women earned more than the lowest-paid men in the mills. Tianjin mills began to use both time and piece wage systems to pay workers during the late 1920s. Women in the industries who were cleaners, carders, sizers, finishers, and coolers were paid by the day. On the other side, women who played the role of rovers, spinners, reelers, bundlers, warp, and weavers were paid on both time and piece system. Such a difference in the pay system indicates the gender imbalance that existed during the interwar years. To maintain the workforce, employers offered additional bonuses to

²² Ibid, 299

²³ Ibid, 175

²⁴ Kathy Le Mons Walker, "Economic Growth, Peasant Marginalization, and the Sexual Division of Labor in Early Twentieth-Century China: Women's Work in Nantong County" *Modern China* 19 (1993): 375.

women who demonstrated commitment, hard work, discipline, dedication, and punctuality. The bonuses were usually paid on traditional holidays either in the form of cash or kind. These bonuses were meant to stir women to work hard and produce more products for exportation, so China's economy will grow at a faster rate.²⁵

Through the efforts of women employed as cotton workers in both the North and South regions, more products were produced from the cotton industries to meet the massive demand for cotton products. For instance, the heavy demand for homespun and handwoven cloth in both China and other regions were met through the effort of women as cotton workers.²⁶ Part of the products produced was exported to Europe while the Chinese indigenes used the surplus. The growth in exports boosted the Chinese economy as export duties were charged by the Chinese government.

In addition, as women worked to earned wages, they paid taxes to the government and had extra money to cater for themselves and their family.²⁷ Women who earned from the cotton work save part of their wages, use some for clothing, give some to their parents, and keep the rest for family life. Such spending helped in reducing the poverty rate in China since young women now earned for themselves, paid taxes, contribute to the household economy, and purchase their own needs. Contributions from women changed the status of most women and gave them independence from men.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid,156.

²⁶ Ibid,355-356.

²⁷ Ibid,169.

²⁸ Ibid,169-170.

Women in the Sex Industry

During the interwar year, sex work became complex and encompassed other services other than the central idea of prostitution.²⁹ Women in the sex industry thus, women who acted as tea hostess, taxi dancers, masseuse, female guides, striptease performers, restaurants workers, amusement center workers, and prostitutes cannot be neglected out of the Chinese economy during the interwar years.³⁰ Brothel became a greater part of the Chinese economy and women-owned most brothels. The brothel owners and women sex workers paid regular taxes to the Chinese government.³¹ Some young girls in the cotton mills used their wages to purchase adornments and this released parents from the pressure of worrying about buying things for their children.³²

Prostitution

Sex work became the surviving means of the poor, unemployed, and the displaced. It is estimated in every household, one out of six was a prostitute. The Special Vice Committee Report in 1920 counted 4,522 Chinese prostitutes in the International Settlement in Shanghai and there was one out of every one-hundred and forty-seven Chinese residents of the settlement.³³ Brothel workers were ranked into three hierarchies. The top level was occupied by the elite courtesan class who provided service for wealthy men. In the middle were women who offer services to middleclass men. At the bottom were women who worked as prostitutes who were mostly refugees

²⁹ Gail Hershatter. *Dangerous Pleasure: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1997),54-56.

³⁰ *Ibid*,54.

³¹ Christian Henriout, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai, A Social History, 1849-1949* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001), 88-92.

³² *Ibid*,170.

³³ A Report from the Special Vice Committee in China on Prostitutes, 1920:84 .

known as “wild chickens” who had migrated from famine-prone areas. Prostitution became a legal institution in which the Chinese government implemented policies to regulate taxation.

In 1929, The Bureau of Social Affairs conducted registration and classification of prostitutes. The prostitutes were divided into five levels. The largest group was the third level prostitutes. The lower third level prostitute earned between one to four *mao* per day, while a fifth-grade prostitute could make between seven *fen* to three *maos*.³⁴ Just like the women who worked in the other factories, streetwalkers and the wild chickens organized themselves into sisterhoods to support and protect each other. As a sisterhood, sisters provided financial support whenever the need arises. These sisters contributed to help each other in times of financial need, help the family of each member in times of need. The daily proceeds were collected and given to one person at the end of the week. The allocation of money to sisters was on a rotational basis and this made them support their family, paid taxes, and support others. Some women depended on the brothel system as casual laborers to supplement their monthly income. Their service delivered as brothel workers helped them to earn money to cater for themselves and their family.

While poverty was bound to happen in some regions, some women depended on working in the brothel as prostitutes to earn wages for their household. Women who depended on prostitution as a supplement to their job were mostly illegal prostitutes because the Shanghai Municipal Administration did not register women who provided service to men in both inside and outside the brothel.³⁵ Some women were as well employed by agencies to provide service to men during the day and as wives by night. Some agencies relied on women to increase their revenue as the women employed as sex workers provided service to men at a cost.³⁶ The service delivered was

³⁴ Shanghai Bureau of Social Affairs. *Wages and Hours of Labor in Greater Shanghai, 1929*. Shanghai, 1929

³⁵ *Ibid*,58.

³⁶ *Ibid*,58.

paid on daily basis and the money earned as workers were used by the prostitutes while the amount left after their personal expenses were used to support the family. The taxes paid by the prostitutes added up to China's revenue. With effective and romantic service delivered by the prostitutes, men traveled from near and far regions to China to have a company with the prostitutes.³⁷ The men upon their arrival purchase many Chinese products and make use of the available hotels. As such, whereas the prostitutes and brothel owners benefited economically, hotel managers and traders of some products purchase by these first-class men also benefited economically thereby improving China's economy.³⁸

Although the sex industry contributed towards China's economy, Nationalists, Chinese Christians, New Culture Reformers, foreigners, and other Chinese institutions condemned it. Nonetheless, the growth in reformers did not collapse the sex industry since most women used it to survive due to the rampant displacement and famine caused by famine and wars. In Shanghai, prostitution continued until the Communist revolution in 1949 which closed brothels in Shanghai and sent women to rehabilitation centers after advising them to devote themselves. By entering into prostitution, low-income families used it as a means to reduce the rate of poverty since they now provided sexual service to earn wages.

Women as Tea Hostesses

The tea hostesses referred to as a *bolibei* served beverage to guests and provided companionship to tea drinking guests at a cost.³⁹ The discovery that females had the potency to attract more customers base on what the management of one ball discovered made females

³⁷ Ibid,58

³⁸ Ibid,58-60

³⁹ Ibid, 58

dominated as tea hostesses.⁴⁰ By 1930, the tea hostesses charged a dime or two for a cup of tea. Women who functioned as tea hostesses were described as experts due to their ability to attract customers using joking, flirting, fondling, and selling romance. The romantic ability to sell attracted many guests to China as most of them thought of China as a place to release stress. As the number of guests increased, the purchase of tea increased which made teahouse owners earn a higher income. Besides, teahouse women workers earned a higher income monthly which enables them to cater for themselves and their family.

Moreover, the increased in the number of guests boosted the work of transport centers as most of them had to travel from near and far regions. The female hostesses were able to earn an additional dime for their service to guests.⁴¹ Tea hostesses had numerous customers and they could earn a monthly income of hundreds of Yuan. During seasons when the tea business was low, tea hostesses spent the night with customers to earn additional fees for their service.⁴² There were also tea hostesses who did not earn a salary for their service but, pay the cashier's office for the cups of tea they sell as retailers. Women in hardship joined the tea hostesses, sold tea, paid the cashier, and the remaining amount was used to cater for themselves and their household while tea cashiers had an increase in income.⁴³

Women as dance halls workers

Women also worked as dance hall workers during the interwar years. By 1930, dance halls were popular, and women worked as taxi dancers. Women in the dance halls dance with men who purchased tickets for various occasions. As men purchased tickets, dance hall owners earned much

⁴⁰ Ibid,59.

⁴¹ Ibid,59

⁴² Ibid,59

⁴³ Ibid,59.

income and used part to pay taxes and pay their dance hall workers.⁴⁴ Besides, they persuaded guests to buy bottles of drinks of which they were given a percentage for their role in persuading the patrons. The numerous purchases of drinks by guests persuaded by women made the drink business boosted as the drink factories had to produce more to meet the heavy demand by guests who were persuaded by dance hall workers. Numerous women joined the dance hall work including courtesans who aimed at earning extra income after their long service as prostitutes. In the West, dancing was a form of entertainment and had no negative connotation. Nonetheless, when imported into China, it became a sex business where merchants make money to support themselves, pay taxes to the government, and employees were paid to support their family as well.⁴⁵

Women in the Silk Factories

Silk was the dominant export product produced by China during the interwar year due to the growth in global demand for silk early twentieth century. The heavy demand for silk transformed the traditional centers of sericulture in regions like Yangzi into mechanized silk filatures.⁴⁶ Women were noted for their participation in silk production in Shanghai, Nanjing, Shaoxing, and Hangzhou. The silk industry was made up of 95% women out of the total workers.⁴⁷ Women engaged themselves in both the silk factories and family workshops which were devoted to the production of silk products. Some women who used to work in the households as silk spinners and silkworms later moved to the urban centers to work as factory workers in the silk industry due to the growth in heavy demand for women in the silk industries.⁴⁸ The rampant

⁴⁴ Ibid,59.

⁴⁵ Ibid,59.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 297.

⁴⁷ Ibid,300.

⁴⁸ Ibid,297-300.

increase in rural-urban migration was due to displacement, famine, and drought which affected the rural counties.

Women in the silk industries engaged in cocoon drying, peeling, selection, boiling, silk reeling, stretching, inspection and, packaging. Silk products included: clothing, paper, fishing lines, bowstrings, and canvas for painting. These products produced by women were exported to Europe and other neighboring regions while the Chinese citizens used some.⁴⁹ The Meiya Silk Company provided employment opportunity for over thirteen hundred employees of which most of them were women.⁵⁰ Although men functioned in the Meiya Silk Company, women heavily dominated in the company as workers. Women were recruited in the Meiya Silk Company to perform diverse activities ranging from silk reeling, packaging, and parceling products to other services.⁵¹ The wages earned as silk workers were devoted to household expenses, payment of taxes and others.⁵²

In a study conducted by Fei Xiaotong, a Chinese anthropologist, Fei discovered the income women earned from the silk industry as silk reeling workers became the major source of income for the family. The income women earned was more than a supplement to the family income. The women surveyed indicated the income earned provided more than half of the family expenses. In low-income families, the inability of women to earn much from the silk work was to make it impossible for the family to survive.⁵³ Women who worked in the silk industry paid regular taxes to the Chinese government while their silk products were exported to Europe and neighboring regions for sale. Other products were also sold in China. Traders traveled to China to purchase Chinese silk products and sell in other markets. These traders from outside China provided China

⁴⁹ Ibid,300.

⁵⁰ Ibid,297.

⁵¹ Ibid, 297.

⁵² Ibid, 297-298.

⁵³ Ibid,63.

with the needed products, took away silk products on sale and paid government toll. Households depended on the income earned by the women who labored in the silk industry to survive.⁵⁴ These boosted China's economy and the household economy while the heavy demand for silk product also led to the massive demand for more women workers from the early 1920s.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, these contributions to the household and nation's economy did not totally change the status of women.⁵⁶

Figure 1: Distribution of women workers in Shanghai's Industries by 1929 out of 248,641 working in the industries mentioned below.

Industry	Number	Percentage
Cotton spinning	84,270	76
Silk reeling	37,211	73
Cotton weaving	22,394	77
Tobacco	1,703	65
Printing	630	5
Knitting	7,236	71
Silk weaving	1,229	32
Eggs	2,186	61
TOTAL	156,859	63%

Source: *Shanghai Bureau of Social Affairs, Wages and Hours of Labor (Shanghai, 1929)*

It has been established women functioned as textile workers during the interwar years in China. In addition, some women worked in the sex industry as teahouse workers, dancers, guilds,

⁵⁴ Ibid,300.

⁵⁵ Ibid,297.

⁵⁶ Ibid,300.

and prostitutes.⁵⁷ Women workers in the mentioned industries paid regular taxes to the government which increased the government's revenue. Women earned enough for themselves and earned wages to cater for their households. In some families, the absence of men either in search for pasture or dislocation made the women the breadwinners of the households. With the increase in demand for textile products, people travel from distant regions to purchase goods produced by women and these middlemen paid regular export duties which increased China's revenue and helped employers to earn much. While industries grew mostly in the urban centers, the diversification of the economy led to market exposure which increased rural labor demand and increased women wages although inequality between men and women remained constant. Such contributions from women led to an increased in China's export products from a lower value of 486 in 1918 to 631 in 1919.⁵⁸ The above discussions have revealed women's contributions to the Chinese economy were not significantly different from men's own. Although gender was binary, it was sericulture rather than between sericulture and farming.

⁵⁷ Ibid,297-300

⁵⁵ Ibid,272.

⁵⁸ Ibid,24

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