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**Liberation from the Loom? Rural Women, Textile Work, and
Revolution in North China**

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Chapter 6

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The socialist revolution promised to transform the material life of China's rural inhabitants, to bring new objects and technologies—"two-storey brick houses, electric light, and telephones" (*loushang louxia, diandeng dianhua*)—to the countryside, and in doing so, to radically alter existing divisions of labor and patterns of everyday life. How people experienced socialism at the grassroots levels depended as much on the halting and uneven changes in material life as on the sequence of struggles and political campaigns through which we usually analyze socialist China. Few changes in the countryside were more momentous than those related to how rural people clothed themselves. By this I do not mean sartorial change, which was relatively slow, but the way cloth and clothing was produced.

As late as 1936, more than two-thirds of China's cloth output was produced manually, in small urban workshops and rural households.¹ While the old adage that "men farm and women weave" was never strictly accurate (most women participated in farm work at least seasonally, and some men spun and wove), it is true that *all* women in late imperial China, from commoners to the elite, were expected to perform textile work. Textile work shaped women's lives at many levels: it kept them cloistered at home but also linked them to faraway markets; it was associated, in elite poetry and ritual laments, with loneliness and physical isolation, but also gave rise to all-female forms of sociability and networks of technical exchange.² Textiles were the public face of

women who were expected to spend much of their lives indoors and make themselves as invisible as possible if they ventured outside. In the form of betrothal gifts, dowries, and grave clothes, the fruit of women's labor created and reinforced human relationships: women weavers re-created the social fabric with their hands. Textile work even shaped women's bodies: women who spent much of their life squatting in front of the spinning wheel or sitting at the loom developed a set of bodily postures and sensory habits that set them visibly apart from women who did not spin or weave.

Numerous studies have shown that rural hand spinning and hand weaving held out remarkably well in the face of mechanized competition.³ Imports of foreign yarn in the late nineteenth and the rise of mechanized spinning mills in the early twentieth century led to a sharp reduction of laborious, inefficient hand spinning, so that by the turn of the twentieth century, about one half of all yarn used in China was machine-made. Thereafter, however, the advance of machine yarn slowed down, in part because weavers took to combine machine-spun warp threads with homespun weft.⁴ Hand spinning survived in cotton-growing areas, where households continued to use household labor to spin yarn for their own consumption and, in some cases, for commercial weaving.⁵ The picture is more complex in the case of weaving. Imported and domestic factory cloth competed with Chinese handloom cloth; at the same time, the increased availability of cheap factory yarn stimulated the growth of new handloom weaving centers near Shanghai and Tianjin.⁶ As late as 1935, 24 percent of Chinese rural households spun or wove; in cotton-growing provinces like Henan, close to 60 percent did.⁷

When the Chinese Communist Party came to power, the vast majority of rural people wore homespun *tubu* cloth, and millions of rural women spent much of their working life producing cloth and clothes. Within less than ten years, the socialist revolution replaced the

horizontal division of labor between men and women in the farming household with a vertical division between countryside and city. *All* rural people, men and women, were mobilized to work in agriculture—and increasingly *only* in agriculture, as local handicrafts and sidelines were phased out. Textile production, for centuries as integral and necessary a part of rural life as grain cultivation, was taken out of the countryside and redefined as part of urban industry. In the Party’s view, hand spinning and hand weaving were wasteful of raw materials and labor; their very existence in the twentieth century was proof of the distortions that semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism had imposed on China. Once the revolution had put the economy back on a healthy track, demand for such technically outmoded industries would evaporate and they would quickly disappear.⁸

Disappear they did—but neither quickly nor naturally. In the Guanzhong area of Shaanxi province, most rural people continued to wear homespun cloth until the end of the collective period, and anecdotal evidence from other parts of China suggests that this was no exception.⁹ This is perplexing because cotton farmers were obligated to sell their entire harvest to the state, with the exception of small amounts of “self-retained” cotton (*ziliujian*) intended for padding. Moreover, under the system of “unified purchase and marketing” (*tonggou tongxiao*) introduced in 1954, rural people received ration coupons that gave them the right to buy factory cloth, albeit at levels that were substantially lower than those for urban people. Finally, from 1960 on, central and provincial governments issued increasingly strident calls for the suppression of hand spinning and hand weaving, in order to ensure that all of China’s cotton harvest was processed in state factories. The reasons for the survival of *tubu* in the face of state pressure are complex: some farmers may have preferred sturdy handmade cloth to factory cloth, which was initially of poor quality, and many rural people—men as well as women—may have associated handmade

textiles with “proper” gender roles and respectability. The main factor, however, was that state-owned cotton mills failed dismally in supplying rural people with the cloth they needed. Average rural rations remained below replacement levels for much of the 1960s, and were only marginally above these levels in the 1970s. Rations differed widely from place to place, and in many parts of China, people relying solely on state supplies would have found themselves with fewer clothes on their bodies year after year, for about twenty years. Scarce as the rations were, large numbers of rural people never claimed them but instead sold their coupons on the black market, to earn cash for more urgent demands. Rural women, in short, often had no choice but to produce cloth at home with whatever scraps of cotton they could pilfer from the fields or buy on the black market.

Textile work is enormously time consuming: it took about sixty labor days to provide a family of five with the absolute minimum of clothes—one summer suit (to be replaced every three years), one winter suit (replaced every five years), and half a quilt and mattress (replaced every ten years) per person. Making shoes took an additional thirty days at least. If the family was to be clothed decently according to modest standards (a good suit for the household head to wear on market days, new clothes for children every second year), a woman might have to spend one-third to one-half of her waking hours working with spinning wheel, needle, and loom.¹⁰ Yet the Chinese state did not acknowledge the existence of a rural textile crisis, nor did agricultural production teams make special provisions for women who clothed their families. Like men, women were expected to work full-time in agriculture, though their attendance was less strictly enforced. Women dealt with this situation by working “overtime” (*jiaban*), spinning at lamplight for hours after men and children had gone to bed.

In the following pages, I look at everyday Maoism through the lens of cotton cultivation

and textile work. My focus is on the choices of rural women under conditions of great scarcity. How did women find the time and the materials to clothe their families? How did they cope with conflicting demands from families, relatives, and the state? What were the moral valences of different choices? Did a young woman who embroidered a tobacco pouch for her father-in-law fulfill a customary duty, or did she waste time and materials that would have been better spent in collective work? Answers to these questions, I hope, will help us understand how socialism was experienced locally and how this changed over time. Most of my material comes from fieldwork in Zhouzhi and Xingping counties in central Shaanxi and from research in county and provincial archives.¹¹

Textiles and Women's Work in Guanzhong

The Wei River Valley—also known as Guanzhong, the area “within the passes”—contains most of the flat and fertile land in Shaanxi province, with Xi'an at its center. Cotton production in Guanzhong dates back to the early Ming dynasty and underwent a major revival in the 1930s, thanks to the linking of Shaanxi to the national railroad net and energetic measures by the provincial government to promote cotton cultivation.¹² Cotton exports to coastal China increased amid high hopes that Guanzhong would become a main supplier for the textile mills of Shanghai and Tianjin, until the outbreak of war in 1937 cut short the expansion. Despite the opening of new irrigated cotton districts along the Wei and Jing Rivers, export-oriented cotton cultivation did not replace an older pattern of cotton cultivation for home use. In Xingping county, it was said that “all families spin but no one sells cotton; all villages weave but no one sells yarn” (*jiajia fangxian bu mai hua, cuncun zhibu bu mai sha*).¹³ This was not entirely true:

cotton cultivation could be very lucrative, especially during the height of the 1930s cotton boom, and many farmers sold part of their harvest. However, farmers rarely put more than one third of their land under cotton; a common plot size was one to two *mu*. Cotton was a risky crop: one week of heavy rains in the fall could destroy the entire harvest.¹⁴ It also required high investment in seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, and irrigation, and three times more labor input than wheat, maize, or sorghum.¹⁵ The percentage of land under cotton therefore tended to increase with wealth: only farmers with surplus cash and labor could plant much of their land in cotton and benefit from high prices during the 1930s boom.

While not a road to riches, weaving for the market was not as badly underpaid as is often assumed.¹⁶ A standard piece of cloth sold for the equivalent of 50 to 70 *jin* of wheat in normal years, although it might only buy 30 *jin* in crisis years. If we subtract the cost of cotton, we are left with a net income of 23 to 43 *jin* of wheat for the twelve days it took to complete a standard piece—1.9 to 3.6 *jin* for each day of work.¹⁷ In other words, a textile worker earned enough to sustain herself and one to three other household members. Old people in Xingping, where commercial weaving was particularly widespread, maintained that women's contribution to household incomes outweighed that of men: as much as three-quarters of a household's grain income could come from women's textile work.¹⁸

Each stage in the life course of rural women in Guanzhong was marked by the exchange of textiles or the acquisition of new textile skills. Most girls learned to spin at age seven and to weave at age ten to fourteen. Families that did not need their daughters' labor in the fields groomed them for marriage by cloistering them soon after they had learned to spin. One woman I interviewed was told to stop visiting friends when she was nine. With the exception of trips to nearby temple fairs, during which she and her sisters watched village operas from behind the

closed curtains of an oxcart, she did not leave her parents' home until her wedding day.¹⁹ Cloistering was not always that strict, and recent research by Gail Hershatter suggests that the centrality of cloistering in rural women's memories may in fact be the result of systematic misremembering.²⁰ In my case, as in hers, women often recalled episodes of seclusion, which fitted easily with the official narrative of feudal oppression before liberation. Continued conversation brought out memories of farming and other outdoors work, which was often remembered as more painful, emotionally and physically, than domestic work. At the same time, most of the women I interviewed insisted that their farm work was seasonal, and that much of their childhood was spent at the wheel and the loom.²¹ This regime of intensive textile work was relaxed around the seventh day of the seventh month, when girls and young women came together to pray to "Seventh Sister" (*qi jie*, also known as *qi xian*, the Seventh Immortal) for needle skills, as well as the skillful mouths, eyes, hands, and hearts that would win them the love of their future husbands and the respect of their marital families. This was an all-female festival in which girls and unmarried women met to sing, dance, and pray; married women were only allowed to watch from behind a screen.²²

The training of daughters was often very strict, since mothers felt that their chance on the marriage market depended in large measure on their textile skills.²³ Folksongs from Zhouzhi County reflect the hopes and fears of future brides:

The poplar tree is split in two, two neighbors to the left and right
This household's sons can read and write; that household's girls do needlework
First daughter embroiders peonies, second daughter pomegranate flowers
Third daughter, alas, can't embroider; she's told to sit in the dirt and spin cotton
The drive band snaps, the spindle bends; she hasn't spun a single skein

Tears in her eyes, her back is sore; poor thing who can't embroider!

Look at you, what will you do? Who will ever marry you?²⁴

The first years after marriage were often the hardest in most women's lives. Folksongs describe the fate of young women who were treated by their in-laws as a source of cheap labor:

I had finished my embroidery when mother-in-law told me to spin

Not daring to reply I carded cotton and turned the spinning wheel

Midnight came and the cotton was still piled high

I spun until daybreak. With the first morning light I returned to sewing.

My hands were lumps of ice, blood oozing from their backs

My ears like wooden bowls; too numb to hear the cock crow

My feet like icy bricks; when I tried to rise I could not stand.²⁵

Once she had children of her own, a woman would spend much of her time producing cloth and clothes for her own small family, rather than working for the extended household under the supervision of her mother-in-law. Over time, a woman's needlework became her public face—more public, in some cases, than her own person, since married women spent much time inside the family courtyard. Neighbors and relatives judged women on the basis of her family's clothing: neat stitches were the sign of a well-ordered household and an industrious wife and mother.²⁶

Almost all important interactions in rural Guanzhong involved the exchange of textiles. Births, cyclical festivals, and visits to the natal family were occasions for giving textile gifts, and no marriage could be concluded without gifts of cloth and cotton. The customary standard for a bride price in Zhouzhi was “two bundles of cotton and four bolts of cloth” (*liang kun mianhua, sige bu*); enough for two padded winter suits and two thickly padded quilts.²⁷ These gifts were in

fact a form of reverse dowry: most of it was transformed by the bride's family into clothing and bedding for the bride, so that she could enter her new home in style. During the first few years of her married life, a woman was expected to produce gifts for her relatives: embroidered pillow cases for her mother-in-law, tobacco pouches for the father-in-law. If her marital family allowed it, she would also take textile gifts home to her natal family. Gifts of cloth or clothes were also mandatory when children were born. Even the dead had to be clothed, and since they wore their clothes for the entire length of the afterlife, these had to be of the highest quality.²⁸ Three sets of clothes—one unlined set for summer, a lined one for spring and autumn, and a padded one for winter—were the norm. Preparing grave clothes for oneself and one's relatives was seen as an appropriate and dignified end of a woman's working life.

Women's social status was intimately bound up with textile work. Elite and non-elite families alike pursued what Kenneth Pomeranz termed the "economics of respectability:" the gain in social standing and earning power that resulted from keeping women at home.²⁹ Complete, year-round cloistering was most common in elite families: only these families grew or bought enough cotton to keep women constantly employed, and only they subscribed to the strictest notions of propriety. In most families, women participated in farm work during the busy planting and harvest seasons. Only women of very poor families worked in the field day in day out, a situation that they and their male relatives experienced as degrading. For a woman, skill in planting crops or handling animals did not bring recognition: her proper work was indoors, and she could earn praise for herself and her family only through domestic work.

Despite the stereotypical image of the lonely woman at her loom, textile work was intensely social. Girls and young women spun in groups, and their work was often accompanied by songs and story-telling. Weaving was solitary work, but before a woman sat down at the loom,

she had to size and reel the yarn and warp the loom. These tasks required close coordination between several workers, and since women learned these skills in their natal families, they often asked their mothers, aunts, or sisters to help with this task. In China's exogamous kinship system, which isolated women from their closest kin, cooperation around the loom allowed women to reactivate their kinship networks and to connect with close relatives from their natal home.

Textile work created specific bodily postures and sensory skills. In winter, spinning women sat cross-legged on the *kang*, in a way that allowed them to absorb warmth from the heated surface; in spring and summer, they squatted in front of the hand-operated spinning wheel with the feet flat on the ground and the body slanted forward. Women who have spent much of their life spinning and weaving assume these postures with great ease, while women born since the 1970s tend to find them uncomfortable and prefer to sit on chairs. Ways of sitting are associated with specific types of sociability; the way one sits and moves about the *kang*, in particular, is both intimate (one sits close to one another, legs covered by a shared quilt to preserve the heat) and regulated by a set of tacit rules.³⁰ Another example of bodily conditioning through textile work is the way women learned to spin an even thread in the dark. Wu Xiujie reports that this led to frequent conflicts between mothers-in-law, who had learned over time to "see" the thread with their fingers, and daughters-in-law who still relied on their eyes and therefore "wasted" lamp oil.³¹ Ways of sitting, standing, walking, etc. do not directly produce subjectivities, but there is a striking difference between the low and "earthbound" posture of a woman who has spent much of her life squatting in front of the spinning wheel or hunched over her needlework, and the more erect and expansive posture of a younger woman who never did such work.

Cotton and the Socialist State

Textile work, in short, shaped all aspects of rural women's lives, in ways that could be both oppressive and empowering. This complex social world disappeared in the course of the socialist revolution. During the Yan'an years, CCP leaders encouraged women to spin and weave, because local cloth production strengthened the economy of the CCP-controlled border regions and drew women into public life. This changed in 1949: as an article in the *People's Daily* explained, the liberation of Beijing and Tianjin put the new government in possession of 400,000 power spindles and more than 10,000 power looms, whose voracious appetites had to be fed. Manual spinning in the countryside was therefore to be phased out, and the women whose labor was made redundant were to be mobilized to grow cotton for urban industry.³² CCP leaders objected to household-based spinning and weaving because it tied up two resources that were crucial to socialist modernization: cotton—China's most important crop after grain—and women's labor power. Cotton and cotton textiles were central for capital accumulation: cotton mills were the single largest source of state income in Maoist China, accounting for ten percent of revenue,³³ and the export of cotton cloth and garments paid for much-needed technology imports from the Soviet Union and other friendly nations.³⁴ Women's work was central for China's development strategy because industrial expansion depended on a more productive agricultural base, and in the absence of capital inputs (which were reserved for industry), productivity gains in agriculture could be achieved only through increased labor input. Rural women were China's largest untapped labor source, and CCP leaders hoped that their full participation in farm work would free men to work in rural industry and capital construction.³⁵ Obviously, women could work fulltime in agriculture only if they were first liberated from time-consuming textile work.

Cotton acreage in Guanzhong expanded rapidly in the first two years of the PRC but reached a ceiling in 1952, when almost all usable land was either under grain or under cotton. Area yields did not reliably increase until synthetic fertilizer became widely available in the 1970s.³⁶ At the same time, demand from newly built or repaired cotton mills outstripped cotton supplies. After a series of good harvests in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Guanzhong had been designated a “cotton base” for northwestern China, with the task to supply the clothing needs of Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai, and a large number of cotton mills had been built in Xi’an and Xianyang.³⁷ The state-owned Cotton, Yarn, and Textile Company (Huashabu gongsi) was hard-pressed to satisfy demands, and since harvests could not easily be increased, much of its effort focused on suppressing private competition and, above all, reducing the amount of cotton that remained in peasant hands.³⁸ Somewhat paradoxically for a socialist state, local officials were ordered to increase the commodity rate (*shangpinli*) of cotton, i.e. to break open the unity of production and consumption in the rural household and to turn self-sufficient peasants into market-oriented farmers.

In order to achieve this aim, the state trade companies used bait-and-switch tactics that were as ruthless as those of any private trader. Even before the formal ban on private cotton trade in 1954, the state aimed to procure 80 percent of the cotton harvest, leaving only 20 percent in the hands of cotton farmers.³⁹ Actual procurement fell far short: in 1952, the State Cotton Company obtained only 36 percent of Shaanxi’s estimated harvest, less than in all other major cotton producing provinces.⁴⁰ In order to increase its harvest share, the Cotton Company introduced a system of advance purchases (*yugou*) under which farmers were asked in early spring to pledge their future harvest, in exchange for an advance payment of twenty percent of the expected harvest value, to be paid in cash or raw materials. Survey reports conducted by the

Cotton Company and the Supply and Marketing Cooperatives show that many farmers were reluctant to accept these loans, for fear that a poor harvest would leave them in debt. They were particularly skeptical about accepting goods (grain, seedcake fertilizer, or factory cloth) instead of cash, partly because of the poor quality of the goods offered, partly because they feared “that later on, we find ourselves without cash and thus lose our freedom” (*jianglai meiyou lingqian yong, bude ziyou le*).⁴¹ Anxious farmers pleaded: “can we perhaps order less, or perhaps not order any goods at all?” The answer, it seems, was no—the Cotton Company, and above all the Supply and Marketing Coops, were so eager to tap into the “great latent purchasing power” of rural households that they pushed for high sales pledges and high ratios of payment in kind, depicting the purchase of factory goods as a “patriotic and collectivist” duty and as cotton farmers’ contribution to “strengthening the worker-peasant alliance.”⁴² Unsurprisingly, many farmers overcommitted, leading to sharp recriminations the following year.

In 1951 and 1952, state traders pushed aggressively for early sales; in 1953, the situation was reversed. The summer wheat harvest in North China was so poor that state planners expected serious problems in supplying the urban population with food grain. Cotton farmers were among the largest non-urban grain consumers, and state officials feared that putting cash in their hand would drive up grain prices in a market that was not yet under complete state control. Since higher purchase prices could not be passed on to urban consumers, increased rural demand would cause massive losses to the state. The central government therefore lowered cotton procurement prices from a level of nine kg of wheat for every kg of cotton to a ratio of 1:6.25.⁴³ In addition, local cotton procurement stations were ordered to delay purchase as long as possible without provoking open protests, ideally until the spring wheat harvest.⁴⁴ Since cotton deteriorates quickly if not properly dried and stored, farmers had no choice but to stand in line at

the procurement stations, often for several days on end. Once their cotton was weighed, company personnel often arbitrarily downgraded it. Worst of all, farmers were not paid in cash but in IOUs, to be cashed in only after the spring harvest. In late 1953 and early 1954, angry cotton farmers took to torching cotton warehouses, and the situation became so tense that the police handed out firearms to procurement station personnel.⁴⁵

Cotton farmers reacted to the 1953 crisis by reducing the area under cotton cultivation, in some cases destroying unripe cotton crops and replacing them with winter wheat.⁴⁶ With the introduction of “unified purchase and marketing” in 1954, cotton became a formal state monopoly. Only a minority of farmers had joined mutual aid groups or cooperatives by that time, and in theory, independent farmers were free to grow as much or as little cotton as they chose. In practice, however, township and village governments were given production quotas, and almost all cotton farmers had signed mandatory contracts which were enforced even after floods and droughts. Farmers who had pledged more than they could sell—often under pressure from above—were criticized in public and had to repay their cash advances; those who had cotton left after fulfilling their pledge were “to be mobilized and persuaded” to sell it to the local procurement station, at a slightly higher “negotiated” price (*yijia*).⁴⁷ Cotton farmers were allowed to retain only enough cotton to pad winter clothes and quilts, in most localities 1 kg per person. This “self-retained cotton” (*ziliujian*) became the main source of fibers for rural people’s clothes in the collective period.

Women’s Work under Socialism

Early PRC gender politics were more concerned with reforming the feudal family than with changing the patterns of women’s work. Freedom of marriage and divorce and the right to

resist cruel and unfair treatment in the family—these were the slogans that attracted many women to the CCP. Yet from early on, equal participation in productive work, always understood as work *outside* the household, was portrayed as the final aim of women’s liberation. Songs and plays at that time depicted women’s liberation as a process of stepping out of the darkness and loneliness of the feudal family, into the sunshine of public life and public work.⁴⁸ There is no reason to doubt that many women, especially young women, experienced the revolution this way. Strict cloistering came to an end and women were encouraged to participate in politics, although this often meant no more than the passive attendance of village meetings. Women I interviewed in Gedatou village, Zhouzhi county, remembered little change in their daily life and work routines during the first years of the PRC. Most of them worked primarily indoors until collectivization in 1956-57, when participation in farm work became the norm. After collectivization, women worked in all-female teams (*funii dui*) under female leaders, sometimes alongside men but usually on separate tasks. Like men, they worked three daily shifts (morning, forenoon, and afternoon), though women, different from men, could skip part of a shift if they had to take care of a baby or of urgent household tasks. What ensured women’s participation in collective work was not coercion but the need to earn work points that could be converted into cash and grain. Commercial weaving, the main source of cash income for most families until collectivization, was increasingly curtailed and finally banned;⁴⁹ and while black market sales of handloom cloth continued, the state left too little cotton in the villages for weaving to remain a major source of income. It was the loss of textile “sidelines” (which in many parts of Guanzhong had been the main source of cash income) that made it necessary for rural women to turn towards collective work.

The transition from a situation in which most women worked mostly indoors to one in

which fieldwork was the norm was extraordinarily rapid. Based on Women's Federation records, Gao Xiaoxian estimates that women's participation in agricultural work tripled from 30-50 yearly labor days in 1955 to 140 labor days in 1956.⁵⁰ A report from the Beijingzhai cooperative in Zhouzhi shows that in 1955, women worked an average of only 9.6 days in the collective fields. Only very young women and those old enough to be free of household duties worked more than ten days; women aged 18 to 50 worked in the fields for 5.5 days a year.⁵¹ Only four years later, however, women's labor input had risen to the same level as men's.⁵² Women's mobilization for agricultural work took place in a context of general labor intensification. "Too little time and too much work" seems to have been a nearly universal complaint in newly collectivized villages. Some people compared the collectives to labor camps, or opined that "increased income under the collectives is a good thing, but working nonstop in all seasons is simply too much; we'll all end up flayed with our skins stretched out on a frame" (*ba renpi jiu da zai gangan shang*).⁵³

The Great Leap Forward with its large infrastructural campaigns further intensified labor demands. Women, like men, were mobilized to build roads, irrigation canals, and reservoirs. In Gedatou, women's teams competed with men's teams to flatten the hillock or "bump" (*geda*) that had given the village its name; deep plowing, close planting, and "fertilizing" fields with dredged river sand or rubble from torn down houses further added to the work load. Many young women enthusiastically embraced the challenge of demonstrating that they could work as hard as men. As Kimberley Manning has shown, female activists and grass root leaders during the Great Leap Forward were often indifferent or hostile towards aspects of CCP policy that stressed the reproductive role of women: health programs, sanitation, and protection from overwork and disease.⁵⁴ In Guanzhong, too, women activists chose spectacular self-denial and punishing work,

rather than protection from physical suffering, as their route to liberation.⁵⁵ Reproductive work in the household, whether it consisted of raising children or of clothing a family, was difficult to reconcile with this role.

In the long run, however, it was the intensification of cotton cultivation that added most to women's workloads in the region. Cotton is a labor-intensive crop at the best of times; it was especially labor-intensive in Maoist China where fields were weeded manually and insect pests removed and cotton picked by hand. Because cotton yields decline rapidly after several years of cultivation, teams had to mobilize more and more labor simply to keep output at constant levels. Traditionally, cotton cultivation in Guanzhong had been men's work, but it became almost completely feminized after collectivization. Tens of thousands of women participated in so-called "Silver Flower Contests," competitions to raise cotton output through improved—and, in most cases, more labor intensive—cultivation techniques. As Gail Hershatter and Gao Xiaoxian have shown, these campaigns had a liberating effect on female activists and labor models, some of whom gained national prominence, albeit often at great cost to their health and private life.⁵⁶ However, women who did not aspire to activist or model status often experienced these contests as exhausting and badly remunerated production drives.

While women's participation in the fields increased dramatically, little was done to reduce domestic workloads. Most villages introduced canteens during the Great Leap Forward, and some experimented with forms of collective childcare, but these efforts, poorly thought through and hastily implemented, remained unpopular and were abandoned in the famine years that followed the Leap.⁵⁷ Women's textile work also continued unchanged. In theory, the introduction of rationing in 1954 should have ensured that every person received an adequate supply of factory-produced cloth. Cloth rations differed widely from year to year and from place

to place, but rural rations were consistently lower than urban ones, by a ratio of about one to two.⁵⁸ Rations were also set lower in historically poor mountain areas than in the wealthier plains. To counter accusations of unfairness, state publications explained that rationing was not an instrument of leveling but was designed to assure that people were supplied the quantity of cloth they were accustomed to.⁵⁹ Average rural rations in Guanzhong dropped from around five square meters in the early 1950s to less than one square meter in the crisis years of 1960 and 1961, and then gradually rose back to about four square meters per year.⁶⁰ Based on my interviews, I estimate a yearly *subsistence* minimum of three square meters of *tubu* cloth, or four square meters of factory cloth (which is lighter and wears out more quickly). This is enough for one suit of summer clothes, one suit of winter clothes, and a quilt and blanket shared between two, to be replaced every three to five years. Twice that amount (6 m² of *tubu* or 8 m² of factory cloth) would constitute a *social* minimum—the amount needed, according to local standards, by a person who is poor but not destitute. Ration supplies, in other words, were sufficient to keep people covered, but not to keep them decently clothed according to the very frugal standards of the time.

However, rural people in Zhouzhi did not use their rations. All my informants agreed that only village cadres (who were expected to wear “urban” clothing when they attended meetings) and courting or recently married couples wore factory cloth. Most other people sold their ration coupons on the black market and continued to wear *tubu* until the 1970s. The reason was cash scarcity: high quotas and low state procurement prices for wheat and cotton depressed collective incomes and reduced the amount of cash and grain that was distributed at year’s end to team members. In Gedatou, the average value of a male labor day was around 0.5 *yuan*, with substantial variations between teams and over time; women earned about 0.4 *yuan* a day.

Assuming 300 workdays for a man and 250 workdays for a woman, a family with two earners earned 250 *yuan* a year. Since most of this income was retained by the collective to compensate for grain consumed by the family, disposable income was often as low as 50 *yuan*—barely enough to purchase salt, vinegar, school books, and other necessary items. By making cloth at home, households not only saved the money they would otherwise have spent on factory cloth (between five and fifteen *yuan* per person) but also earned an additional 1.2 to 6 *yuan* from the sale of their coupons.

As mentioned above, the main source for homemade cloth was the “self-retained cotton” (*ziliujian*) ration, set in most teams at one kg per person. One kg of cotton yields about nine meters of *kuanbu* cloth (45 cm wide), or about four square meters—more than the subsistence minimum of three square meters. However, only part of the ration could be used for spinning: in an area where few people owned any wool or leather garments, warmth in the winter came from cotton padding. A warm winter suit contained about 1 kg of cotton padding; a large quilt required 1.5-2 kg. If quilts and padded garments were taken apart once a year and the cotton was washed and fluffed, the padding could be used for up to ten years, but some new cotton must be added every year. If we subtract the amount needed for padding as well as losses in spinning, we arrive at a yarn availability of 590 g, equivalent to 2.5 square meters of cloth—somewhat below the subsistence minimum.⁶¹

People without additional sources of cotton would have reached the end of the collective period with their clothes not only patched (as indeed most rural people did) but in complete tatters. How, then, did people manage? Part of the answer was pilfering: while farmers I interviewed often maintained that taking cotton from the fields was “impossible,” former team leaders said that the practice was widespread and joked about women “returning from the cotton

harvest with big bellies” because they had stuffed so much lint in their jackets. Retired commune-level cadres also said that teams hid part of their harvest; in retrospect, they saw this as legitimate, even though they had once tried to stamp out the practice.⁶² Teams sold cotton on the black market to finance necessary purchases of fertilizer, pesticides, and fuel. Many teams also maintained a social fund to help families defray the costs of marriages and funerals. Young men who were about to marry received one to two *kun* (5-10 kg) of ginned cotton to help them pay their bride price; some teams also gave one to two *jin* (0.5-1 kg) of cotton to help families clothe their dead. At year-end meetings, when teams distributed cash and grain income, many teams also gave out “secret” shares of cotton—sometimes as much as one extra kg per person.

Another source of cotton was the black market, fed by illegal sales of collective stocks. Cash-strapped farmers rarely bought cotton for their own clothing needs, but in a common pattern, women bought cotton, transformed it into cloth, and exchanged cloth for more cotton. By doing this repeatedly, they could earn cash income for everyday needs or accumulate cotton for a bride price or cloth for a dowry. Profits in black market weaving were relatively high, especially if one made the long trek to the cattle fairs of Dianzhen and Mazhao at the foot of the Qinling Mountains, where people from remote mountain villages exchanged livestock and forest products for cloth and winter stores. A woman who bought three *jin* of raw cotton for four to six *yuan* could produce one standard-length cloth (14 by 0.45 m) in ten to twelve days of work and sell it for 20 to 30 *yuan*, earning much more than what she would have earned in the fields. Several interviewees, including a former chairwoman of the village Women’s Federation, admitted that they sold one or two pieces every year; one old lady even claimed that she had sold about ten pieces every year for several consecutive years. Most people, however, said that weaving for the market was too risky, and that in any case they could not withdraw labor from

the team to the extent necessary for commercial weaving.

The Experience of Work under the Collectives

Women in Zhouzhi, and elsewhere in rural China, participated in four distinct economic spheres: a planned economy in which the state was the first claimant to labor time and goods, leaving collectives and individuals only with what they needed according to state estimates; a household economy in which women provided for their children and performed labor for husbands and in-laws; a black market economy that siphoned resources like cotton, cloth, and coupons out of the villages and into the cities; and a gift economy in which no marriage could be concluded, no newborn child accepted into the community, and no dead person buried without the ritual exchange of cloth. Demands from these distinct spheres converged on the bodies of women, who were forced to work triple shifts in collective agriculture, in unrecognized and invisible home textile work, and in bearing and raising unprecedented numbers of children. Under conditions of pervasive scarcity, to fulfill one obligation often meant to neglect another one. Each hour spent in the field was an hour not spent at the loom; more farm work meant more cash and grain, but also fewer clothes for the family and thus potentially a loss of social standing. Weighing field work against textile work was not just a material consideration—full stomachs against warmth—but a choice between obligations towards state and collective and those towards one's family. Both obligations were deeply felt: the leader of the women's agricultural team was not a remote functionary but a neighbor and perhaps a relative; her demand that each able-bodied woman worked three shifts a day could not simply be shrugged off.

For many women, the only way to square this circle was to work ever longer hours, up to the limit of endurance. Women rose before men and children and went on working long after

men had gone to bed; in contrast to men, who took naps in the afternoon, women filled their short breaks with textile work. In busy periods, women routinely slept for only three to four hours every night. Many women I interviewed remembered falling asleep over their spinning wheels, and some said that the only rest they had for many years was when they fell sick—but even then, they went back to work before full recovery. Pregnant women often worked into the last few weeks of pregnancy and returned to the fields a few weeks after giving birth, not even sitting out the traditional month of post-partum confinement (*zuo yuezi*).

Intense collective labor, to be sure, had its joys. Gao Xiaoxian, in her work on the Silver Flower Contest, quotes the enthusiastic recollection of a former activist:

At that time, we had such a bustling life working in the fields! Recalling those times, we had such a happy life. When we went weeding in the fields, each with a hoe working in a long line, we talked, laughed and sang. Sometimes we gathered together and had great fun. It was really a carefree life, just wonderful!⁶³

How women experienced collective work depended largely on their work experience before collectivization. For women from poor families, farm work was nothing new. Feng Jinlian, for example—a sprightly eighty years old at the time of the interview—learned to spin when she was six and to weave when she was twelve. Poverty forced her brothers to hire out as farmhands, so that she and her sisters had to do most of the work on the farm. She claimed, with some pride, that there was no task in the house or on the farm that she could not do; unusually for a woman, she knew how to plow and drive an oxcart. At the opposite end of the spectrum was Du Fengying, born into a landlord family in the same year as Feng. She learned to spin at age seven or eight, did not weave until she was seventeen, and did not do any farm work before land reform; in fact, she hardly ever left her home. Her first experience of farm work was in the early 1950s,

when she and other women from well-off families began to work outside—driven more by the wish to remove the stigma of idle “landlord wife” than by economic need. She remembers farm work as difficult and “awkward” (*bieniu*); initially, she and her fellow workers thought they would never learn the knack. Archival documents from the 1950s also mention women’s lack of agricultural skill and of enthusiasm for farm work; one document speaks of the need to transform women’s current attitude of “if you have wine today, drink it today” into a spirit of “meticulous and precise farming, long-term advance planning, and thrift in food and raw material use.”⁶⁴ Interestingly, reports by the Women’s Federation are similar in tone, accusing rural women of “confused” or “muddled” attitudes towards production.⁶⁵

Whether they grew up as poor peasants or as landlords, all women I interviewed worked from an early age. For them, the quality of work did not depend on whether it was hard or not; all work was hard in different ways. Bad work was lonely, isolated work; the worst work was that of a young wife harassed by a strict mother-in-law. Good work was work with peers, accompanied by jokes and laughter. Whether the work took place inside or outside the home was immaterial: Du Fengying, who grew up cloistered in her home, remembered her childhood as a happy one: there were nine girls in her extended family, and while they spun most of the day, they were allowed to take breaks in the garden, climb trees, play with marbles, or make paper cuts. Feng Jinlian, by contrast, experienced her work out in the fields as lonely and terrifying. Nobody, she said, spoke to a girl in the fields, not even other girls of the same age. Her most vivid childhood memory is that of encountering a wolf in the fields: a stark symbol of the danger, loneliness, and isolation of outdoors work. But the same work was good work if carried out with peers: all my interviewees described work in the teams as joyful (*renao* and *gaoxing* were the terms most often used) because it took place in the company of equals, free from the supervision of seniors.

Another source of work satisfaction was the learning of new skills. As Sigrid Schmalzer shows in her chapter in this book, participation in the mass science movement had the potential to empower people who had traditionally been denied access to technology and scientific knowledge. Gao Xiaoxian describes the enthusiasm with which young women participated in the “Qiuxiang field” movement of mass experimentation, named after the model cotton cultivator Zhang Qiuxiang.⁶⁶ The women I interviewed, most of whom were neither activists nor grassroots leaders, had a rather more jaded view of mass experimentation. Qiuxiang fields, they recalled, did indeed produce higher than average yields, but they also required a very high input of unpaid volunteer labor. One woman laughingly recalled a competition between her all-female Qiuxiang team and an all-male “Wang Baojing corn growing team,” in which the women applied huge quantities of solid manure to the cotton plants while the men applied equally large quantities of urine to the corn. The initial results in both teams were encouraging, but in the end, the overfertilized plants collapsed and both teams lost their harvest.⁶⁷ Other women said that experimentation in the Qiuxiang fields consisted mainly in applying the extra rations of synthetic fertilizer that were made available by the agricultural extension station, and that they did not learn any new skills.⁶⁸

Despite these limitations, there can be no doubt that Silver Flower Contests and experimental fields gave a new visibility to women’s work and that young women, in particular, embraced their new social role as socialist producers. However, the valorization of new types of women’s work was mirrored by the devaluation of other types. While women became visible as agricultural producers, their textile work became invisible, despite the fact that it continued to underpin people’s material and social lives. Rituals such as the skill fairy festival on the seventh day of the seventh month were abolished as feudal superstitions, and the exchange of textiles

during births, weddings, funerals, and other celebrations was delegitimized. The way socially necessary work was emptied of cultural meaning is most evident if we look at a brief episode in early PRC policies. For a short time in 1949-50, local authorities encouraged women to form spinning and weaving cooperatives, partly to draw women into politics, partly to fill an urgent need for textiles at a time when most cotton mills were not yet operational.⁶⁹ Nie Yuzhen, the sole surviving member of Gedatou's only spinning coop, remembers how this work raised her status in her family and gave her financial independence from her mother-in-law. She also stressed that her little coop was the first seed of the collective economy in Gedatou, established long before the first agricultural cooperative. Textile work transformed her life: because of the success of her coop, she was elected chairwoman of the village Women's Federation and later became a representative in the county-level People's Congress. Yet she emphatically denied that her work in the coop had any political significance: spinning and weaving were "something outside production" (*shengchan zhiwai de shi*), a "remnant of the old society." Textile work could not be considered work (*gongzuo*), labor (*laodong*), or production (*shengchan*); her spinning coop was nothing but "a group of girls playing around together."

Revolution and Everyday Life

Echoing Joan Kelly's question if European women had a renaissance, Gail Hershatter asks if Chinese rural women had a revolution, and if so, when.⁷⁰ There can be little doubt that women's lives were radically transformed in the decades between 1949 and 1976, yet these changes were not neatly synchronized with the accepted chronology of mass movements and political campaigns. For example, 1966 was not a date of great significance for Guanzhong women: despite the fact that some villages saw vicious factional struggles, none of the women I

interviewed mentioned the Cultural Revolution. When asked, one woman explained that “the Cultural Revolution was all about striking down landlords and rich peasants; this had nothing to do with us poor and lower middle peasants. Those who participated were also landlords, rich peasants, and officials; we ordinary poor and lower middle peasants didn’t talk about who was right or wrong, we simply did not take part.”

For women who came of age at the time of land reform and collectivization, the revolutionary changes of the collective period were filtered through the experience of scarcity and overwork. “Holding up half of the sky” came at a heavy price for women of this generation. In interview after interview, they recalled fatigue, sleep deprivation, and exhaustion from constant overwork, as well as constant scarcity of cotton, cloth, grain, oil, salt, and cash. There can be little doubt that these women worked harder than both their mothers’ and their daughters’ generations. Whether their material lives improved is hard to tell; average cotton cloth consumption—like average grain consumption—stagnated from 1956 to 1976 and was below pre-1949 levels for most of the collective years.⁷¹ Extreme textile scarcity, and with it extreme self-exploitation, came to an end only in the 1970s, due largely to the maturation of China’s chemical industry.⁷² From the early 1970s on, increased input of nitrogenous and phosphate fertilizers led to higher yields in the cotton fields, while diesel-powered irrigation pumps and improved pesticide sprayers reduced workloads in the fields.⁷³ At the same time, China began to produce synthetics: viscose rayon since 1959, rising quantities of polyamide and polyester since 1975.⁷⁴ By the early 1980s, the average rural person bought two meters of *diqueliang* (dacron) a year.⁷⁵ Since these garments were durable even under the harsh conditions of rural China, people were able, for the first time in years, to add new clothing to their wardrobe year after year. To a large extent, it was the advent of the age of plastics that ended a textile crisis which had lasted a

quarter century.

Dacron was only the beginning: from the mid-1970s on, cheap, mass-produced goods began to flow back to the villages. As late as 1970, the average rural household in Guanzhong contained very few factory-made goods: perhaps a thermos flask, a few enamel bowls, a mirror, and a few clothes made from factory cloth. The only foodstuffs that came from outside the area were salt, sugar, cookies, tea, and alcohol; all but the first of these were rare delicacies. Apart from woks, knives, and a few simple farm tools, households owned few metal implements. Spinning wheels, looms, and other wooden tools were made by local carpenters. Houses were built with local clay and timber (kiln-fired bricks and tiles did not come into general use before the 1970s) and heated with local corn and sorghum stalks. Most villages in Guanzhong began to generate electricity in the 1960s, though private use remained limited to one light bulb per household. Bicycles and sewing machines began to appear in rural homes in the last years of the collective period, together with more plentiful supplies of cloth, metal goods, and plastics.

By the 1980s, one of the central promises of socialism – that of a mutually beneficial rural-urban exchange in which raw materials flowed from the countryside to the city and cheap manufactured goods back from the city to the countryside – was slowly becoming reality. Rural people who had grown grain and cotton for the urban sector but had remained too poor to purchase the products that were made with the inputs they provided were now rapidly replacing homespun with factory yarn, hand cloth with factory textiles, cloth shoes with rubber boots, etc. Buying factory goods brought release from household chores; at the same time, labor-saving technologies in agriculture reduced time spent in the fields. If women who came of age in the 1950s bore a double burden in household and collective agriculture, their daughters were free to join the swelling ranks of migrant workers because little work was left to do at home and in the

field, and what was left to do could be done by their mothers. At the same time, they were compelled to leave, because new needs (for example, for expensive schooling for their children) had arisen that could not be denied and could be satisfied only with money earned in wages. Rural people were now integrated in the polity as producers *for* and consumers *from* the national market, in ways that proved more lasting and more binding than those of the collective order. These transformations would not have been possible without the invisible and unpaid of women in the collective period.

¹ Richard A. Kraus, “Cotton and Cotton Goods in China, 1918-1936: The Impact of Modernization on the Traditional Sector” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1968), 143.

² Anne E. McLaren, *Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

³ Chao Kang, *The Development of Cotton Textile Production in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977); Kraus, “Cotton and Cotton Goods in China;” Albert Feuerwerker, “Handicraft and Manufactured Cotton Textiles in China, 1871-1910,” *Journal of Economic History*, 30, no. 2 (1970): 338-738; Philip Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

⁴ Machine-spun yarn had greater tensile strength, making it ideal for warp threads that are stretched taught on the loom. Homespun was preferred for weft because it was thicker and warmer than factory yarn.

⁵ Sidney Gamble, *Ting Hsien: A North China Rural Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), 298-300; Zhang Shiwen, *Dingxian nongcun gongye diaocha* (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe, 1991), 65-72.

⁶ Linda Grove, *A Chinese Economic Revolution: Rural Entrepreneurship in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Kathy Le Mons Walker, *Chinese Modernity and the Peasant Path: Semicolonialism in the Northern Yangzi Delta* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Fong, H.D. [Fang Xianting], *The Growth and Decline of Rural Industrial Enterprise in North China* (Tianjin: Nankai Institute of Economics, 1936).

⁷ Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao* (Historical materials on handicrafts in modern China) (Beijing: Sanlian, 1957), vol. 3, 753.

⁸ It is true that the CCP encouraged manual spinning and weaving in the Yan'an era, mobilizing thousands of women to produce cloth for the revolution. However, this policy was reversed in 1949, when the government decided to phase out hand spinning and hand weaving in favor of modern industry in the next two to three years. See Zhang Zhong, "Fangzhi yu mianhua," (Textile industry and cotton), *Renmin ribao*, April 14, 1949, 1.

⁹ Internet reminiscences about everyday life under Mao contain much information about textile production. See, for example, Chen Zuo, "Tongzhou tubu" (Handmade cloth of Tongzhou), *Dongnan wenhua*, no. 5 (1994): 31. In areas where little cotton was grown (e.g. Sichuan and the mountainous parts of Hebei and Shaanxi), *tubu* was replaced by factory cloth in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See Liu Changren, "Sichuan shougong mianfangzhiye shehuizhuyi gaizao" (The socialist transformation of handicraft cotton textile production in Sichuan), *Chengdu fangzhi gaodeng zhuanke xuexiao xuebao*, 14, no. 2 (April 1997): 48; Zhongshan Yefu,

“Wuliushi niandai Hebei nongcun de yishizhuxing” (Everyday needs in rural Hebei in the 1950-60s), <http://sjzbsm.blog.163.com/blog/static/119927004200911243147514/>).

¹⁰ These are my interview-based estimates. A 1954 *Renmin Ribao* article estimates that it takes one person six months to provide clothes and shoes for a family of three. Kang Zenghui, Liu Shaoye: “Ma Tinghai nongyeshe shi zenyang fadong funü canjia nongye shengchan de” (How Ma Tinghai’s agricultural cooperative promotes women’s participation in agricultural production), *Renmin Ribao*, February 2, 1954, p. 2.

¹¹ From 2006 to 2013, I spent a total of eight weeks in the village of Gedatou, Zhouzhi County, and four weeks in the villages of Zhangli and Danbei, Xingping County.

¹² Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzou weiyuanhui, ed., *Shaanxi sheng zhi: fangzhi gongyezhi* (Shaanxi provincial gazetteer: textile industry) (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin, 1999), 36, 43-47; Eduard B. Vermeer, *Economic Development in Provincial China: The Central Shaanxi since 1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 324-346.

¹³ Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzou weiyuanhui, *Shaanxi sheng zhi*, 46.

¹⁴ Interview Cao Yuqing and Zhao Xijie, November 17, 2006.

¹⁵ Kraus, “Cotton and Cotton Goods in China,” 46.

¹⁶ Huang, *The Peasant Family*, chapter 5. For a more optimistic assessment of the earning capacity of spinners and weavers, see Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 316-326.

¹⁷ Interview Cao Shiyong and Tian Peijie, December 2, 2006.

¹⁸ Interview Yuan Aiying, August 13, 2010.

¹⁹ Interview Du Fengying, November 27, 2006.

²⁰ Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

²¹ The fact that my interviewees remembered more indoors work than Hershatter's may be due to the fact that Hershatter's fieldwork area includes mountainous areas in Southern Shaanxi, where no cotton was grown.

²² Interview Du Fengying and Guo Xiuzhen, November 27, 2006; interview Wang Xiuzhen and Feng Jinlian, September 4, 2008.

²³ One memoir describes how a mother forced her daughters to redo their needlework over and over again, until she was satisfied with the quality of the stitching. Zhang Zhanghuai, *Lao Jingtai* (The old well) (Xi'an: Sanqin, 2002), 104-105.

²⁴ Ibid., 102-103; Wang Anquan, ed., *Zhouzhi geyao xuan* (A selection of songs from Zhouzhi) (Zhouzhi: Zhouzhi xian wenhuaguan, 1985), 67.

²⁵ Zhang Zhanghuai, *Lao Jingtai*, 105; Wang Anquan, *Zhouzhi geyao xuan*, 118-122.

²⁶ Interview Chen Zi'an, August 2, 2010.

²⁷ A bundle (*kun*) of cotton are 10 jin (5 kg).

²⁸ "One puts on grave clothes only once in a lifetime; the cloth therefore needs to be woven extra fine and the cotton should be a bit thicker." Interview Peng Shu'e, September 15, 2008.

²⁹ Kenneth Pomeranz, "Women's Work and the Economics of Respectability," in *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China*, ed., Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 239-263.

³⁰ See Mareile Flitsch, "Knowledge, Embodiment, Skill and Risk: Anthropological Perspectives on Women's Everyday Technologies in Rural North China," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Society*, 2, no. 2 (2008): 265-288.

³¹ Wu Xiujie, *Ein Jahrhundert Licht: Eine technikethnologische Studie zur Beleuchtung im chinesischen ländlichen Alltag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 146-147.

³² Zhang Chong, “Fangzhi yu mianhua” (Textile production and cotton), *Renmin Ribao*, 14 April 1949, p. 1.

³³ Nicholas Lardy, *Agriculture in China's Modern Economic Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 123-125.

³⁴ Chao Kang, *The Development of Cotton Textile Production in China*, 279-283.

³⁵ Women's mobilization for agricultural work is described in detail in Marina Thorborg, “Chinese Employment Policy in 1949-78 with Special Emphasis on Women in Rural Production”, in *Chinese Economy Post-Mao*, Joint Economy Committee, Congress of the United States, US Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1978.

³⁶ Zhonghua quanguo gongxiao hezuo zongshe mianmajiu: 1949-2000 *Zhongguo mianhua tongji ziliao huibian* (Cotton and hemp office of the all-China marketing and supply cooperative: Collected statistical materials on Chinese cotton from 1949 to 2000) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji, 2005), vol. 1, 89. Area yields in the collective era grew from 13 kg/mu (1950) to 28 kg/mu (1978). See also Vermeer, *Economic Development*, 350-351.

³⁷ Vermeer, *Economic Development*, 18-19, 346-354; Chao Kang, *The Development of Cotton Textile Production in China*, 252.

³⁸ The mechanisms by which the state tried to increase its share of the cotton harvest resembled those described by Oi for the grain harvest – also in that in both cases, state procurement prices were below production costs. See Jean Oi, *State and Peasant: The Political Economy of Village Government*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

³⁹ Shaanxisheng gouxu mian zhidao weiyuanhui, “Taolun xin hua shangshi qian nongcun mianhua cunliang” (A discussion of rural cotton stocks before the new cotton harvest hits the market), May 28, 1952, Shaanxi Provincial Archives (hereafter cited as SPA), Gongxiao hezuoshe folder, no. 230, file 44, 34.

⁴⁰ Zhonghua quanguo gongxiao hezuo zongshe mianmaju, vol. 1, 270.

⁴¹ Xibei qu hezuoshe, “Hansong yugou mianhua gongzuo jingyan zongjie” (Summary report on our experience in the advance purchase of cotton) May 12, 1952, SPA, Gongxiao hezuoshe folder, no. 230, file 44b, 8.

⁴² Ibid.; Shaanxi sheng renmin zhengfu, “Wei baogao woting zhaokai quansheng ge zhuyao mianchan xian...” (Report on meeting of all important cotton growing counties of the province), March 30, 1954, SPA, Shaanxi sheng nongcun gongzuobu folder, no. 123.4, file 465, 38-40.

⁴³ Vermeer, *Economic Development*, 348.

⁴⁴ Xibei caiwei zong dangzu, “11 yue 27 ri He Jinshou Fujuzhang...” (November 27, vice director He Jinshou...) December 7, 1953, SPA, Shaanxi sheng weiyuanhui bangongshe folder, no. 123.1, file 1261; Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei, “Zi jiang sheng caijing dangzu guanyu mianhua baoguan gongzuo de jianbao...” (Summary report of the party group of the provincial finance committee concerning cotton storage...) September 10, 1954, SPA, Shaanxi sheng weiyuanhui bangongshe folder, no. 123.1, file 1262; Zhongyang caijing weiyuanhui, “Guanyu 1953 nian shougou xinmian de zhishi” (Directive concerning the 1953 procurement of fresh cotton), August 28, 1953, SPA, Shaanxi sheng weiyuanhui bangongshe folder, no. 123.1, file 657.

⁴⁵ Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei, “Zi jiang sheng caijing dangzu guanyu mianhua baoguan gongzuo de jianbao...” (Provincial finance party group report about on the work of safely storing

cotton...) September 10, 1954, SPA, Shaanxi sheng weiyuanhui bangongshe folder, no. 123.1, file 1262, 8.

⁴⁶ Xibei caiwei, “Shaanxi sheng xinmian shangshi hou...” (Shaanxi province: after new cotton hits the market...), September 10, 1954, SPA, Shaanxi sheng weiyuanhui bangongshe folder, no. 123.1, file 657.

⁴⁷ Shaanxi sheng renmin weiyuanhui cai liang mao bangongshe, “Guanyu xinmian shougou zhong muqian cunzai de jige zhongyao wenti de yijian,” (Advice concerning some important current problems in the procurement of fresh cotton), November 21, 1955, SPA, Gongxiao hezuoshe folder, no. 230, file 132.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the immensely popular “Women’s Freedom Song”: “in the past, women were locked up in King Yama’s Hall, now we have broken the iron chains / Women have become free persons who can take care of the great affairs of the nation / Liberation cannot be for one half only; fully liberated, we participate in production / Let’s weed out the Chiang Kai-shek reactionaries, vanguard and rearguard work together / Let’s work hard in production and not be idle; let’s all put in more effort / Let’s build a new China for a million years.” “Funü ziyou ge” (Women’s Freedom Song), <http://baike.baidu.com/view/2758318.htm>.

⁴⁹ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan, Zhongyang dang’anguan: *1953-1957 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingji dang’an ziliao xuanbian: shangye juan* (Selection of economic archival materials from 1953 to 1957: commerce) (Beijing: Zhongguo Wujia, 2000), 243-250; Shaanxi sheng renmin zhengfu, “Shaanxi sheng renmin zhengfu shixing mianbu jihua gongying zhanxing banfa” (Temporary guidelines for the People’s government’s planned supply of cotton cloth), August 26, 1954, SPA, Shaanxi sheng weiyuanhui bangongshe folder, no. 123.1, file 1261, 9.

⁵⁰ Gao Xiaoxian, “‘The Silver Flower Contest:’ Rural Women in the 1950s and the Gendered Division of Labour,” in *Translating Feminisms in China*, ed. Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 166.

⁵¹ Men of the same age group contributed 150 labor days per year. Zhonggong Zhouzhi xian weiyuanhui, “Guanyu Beijingzhai nongye shengchan hezuoshe diaocha baogao” (Investigation report on the Beijingzhai agricultural cooperative) September 18, 1955, SPA, Shaanxi sheng nongcun gongzuobu folder, no. 123.4, file 547, 45.

⁵² Zhonggong Zhouzhi xian weiyuanhui, “Zhouzhi nongcun renmin gongshe zhengshe jieshushi jiben qingkuang diaocha” (Investigation of the basic situation of people’s communes after commune rectification), August 25, 1959, SPA, Shaanxi sheng nongcun gongzuobu folder, no. 123.4, file 718, 23.

⁵³ Zhonggong Baoji xianwei, “Zhonggong Baoji xianwei guanyu nongmin sixiang qingkuang de diaocha baogao” (Investigation report of the Baoji county party committee on farmers’ ideological stance), August 17, 1957, SPA, Shaanxi sheng nongcun gongzuobu, folder 123.4, file 632, 2.

⁵⁴ Kimberley E. Manning, “Making a Great Leap Forward? The Politics of Women’s Liberation in Maoist China,” *Gender & History*, 18, no. 3 (November 2006): 586-587.

⁵⁵ Xingping xian Fulian hehui, “Quan xian Funü jinyibu dongyuan qilai zhuahao mianhua bozhong” (Women of the entire county are mobilized one step further to do a good job in sowing cotton) April 5, 1960, Xingping County Archives, Funü lianhehui folder, file 4.1.73, 74-79.

⁵⁶ Gail Hershatter, “The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese Women and the 1950s,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 43-70; Hershatter, “Local Meanings of Gender and Work in Rural Shaanxi in the 1950s,” *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work,*

Households, and Gender in China, ed. Barbara Entwistle and Gail E. Henderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Gao, “The Silver Flower Contest.”

⁵⁷ Xingping xian Fulian hehui, “Xingping xian fulian guanyu Huangzhong shengchandu zai xiashou zhong zuzhi youer shi mai deng wenti de baogao” (Report by the Xingping women’s federation on Huangzhong brigade organizing childcare during the summer harvest), March 6, 1961, Xingping County Archives, Funü lianhehui folder, file 4.1.92, 15-17. Guanzhong was spared the worst of the 1960-61 famine, but suffered from poor harvests and high extraction longer than other provinces. Serious malnourishment was still widespread in late 1964.

⁵⁸ Yu Zongxian and Zhao Gang, *Zhonggong fangzhiye zi fazhan jiqi dui woguo fangzhipin duiwai maoyi zhi yingxiang* (The development of textile production in Communist China and its impact on our country’s foreign trade in textile products) (Taipei: Xingzhengyuan jingjihui, 1988), 105. See also Qian Zhiguang et al., *Dangdai Zhongguo de fangzhi gongye* (Beijing, Zhongguo shehui kexue 1984), graph on p. 15 of statistical appendix.

⁵⁹ Zhong Ling, *Mianbu wei shenme yao tonggou tongxiao?* (Why unified purchase and marketing for cotton cloth?) (Wuhan, Hubei renmin 1955), 18.

⁶⁰ Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei, “Guanyu mianbu shixing jihua gongying de zhishi” (Directive concerning the planned supply of cotton cloth), August 26, 1954, SPA, Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei folder, no. 123.4, file 1261, 83; Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzou weiyuanhui, *Shaanxi sheng zhi*, 243.

⁶¹ Richard Kraus estimates a national average consumption of 360 g of cotton wool for padding, which I take as a minimum for northern China. Another 50 g out of each kg will be lost in spinning. See Kraus, “Cotton and Cotton Goods in China,” 82.

⁶² Group interview, Yabei township of Zhouzhi county, November 29, 2006.

⁶³ Gao Xiaoxian, “Silver Flower Contest,” 177.

⁶⁴ Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei nongcun gongzuobu, “Weinan diwei jiancha zuzhi duiyu Jingyang Sanqu xiang mianhua shengchan...” (Investigation group of Weinan district: cotton production in Jingyang county, Sanqu township...), September 23, 1953, SPA, Shaanxi nongcun gongzuobu folder, no. 123:4, file 11, 12-14.

⁶⁵ Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei nongcun gongzuobu, “Zi jiang Shaanxi sheng Fulian dui jianli nongye shengchan hezuoshe...” (Concerning the report on the provincial women’s federation’s establishment in agricultural production teams...), January 8, 1954, SPA, Shaanxi nongcun gongzuobu folder, no. 123:4, file 31.

⁶⁶ Gao Xiaoxian, “Silver Flower Contest,” 177-178.

⁶⁷ Interview Jia Yumei, September 10, 2008. On Wang Baojing and Zhang Qiuxiang, see also Kojima Reiitsu, “The Bearers of Science and Technology Have Changed,” *Modern China*, 5, no. 2 (April 1979): 188-189, 203.

⁶⁸ Interview Zhao Xijie, August 6, 2010; Wu Shu’e, August 7, 2010; Teng Jianyou, August 13, 2010.

⁶⁹ Such textile cooperatives had been common in the Shaan-Gan-Ning border region, where women (as well as 8th Route Army soldiers and party leaders) were mobilized to spin and weave.

⁷⁰ Hershatter, “The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese Women and the 1950s,” 63-64.

⁷¹ Lardy, *Agriculture*, 64, Chao Kang, *Development of Chinese Cotton Textile*, 238, 287-8.

⁷² Philip Huang, *The Peasant*, 323.

⁷³ Vermeer, *Economic Development*, 276, 358-359.

⁷⁴ Chao Kang, *Development of Chinese Cotton Textile*, 297-300; Qian Zhiguang et al., *Dangdai Zhongguo de fangzhi gongye*, graph on p. 11 of statistical appendix.

⁷⁵ Yu Zongxian and Zhao Gang, *Zhonggong fangzhiye zhi fazhan*, 106.