

Women in the imperial chinese tributary system



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Most literature regarding the Imperial Chinese tributary system has identified textiles as one of the most demanded commodities within the region but has failed to identify their main producers - women. This paper will argue that the Imperial Chinese tributary system was built on the backs of East Asian women working in the textile industry, while also significantly shaped the ways in which women enter the labour market during this period. First, this paper looks at the Imperial Chinese tributary system that dominated China's relations with the East Asian region for two millennia and the significance of textile commodities within this system. Second, this paper examines the history of women's work in the Chinese textile industry and how it changed along with the economic goals of the various dynasties. Third, this paper points to how the textile industry gave rise to Japan as an economic power in the region, but also the so-called "temporary" work of women in the rise of the Japanese textile industry.

Historical Background on Tributary System

One of the earliest forms of East Asian economic regionalism was the Imperial Chinese tributary system, which consisted of a spoke-hub of loose international relations focused on China as the facilitator of trade and foreign relations. Tributary relations initially emerged during the Tang dynasty as Chinese rulers started perceiving foreign envoys bearing tribute as a "token of conformity to the Chinese world order" and ended mid-Qing dynasty after the end of the Opium War (Lee, 2017, pp. 18). More importantly, the Chinese tributary order was a recognized international system with military, cultural, and economic dimensions that all intersected to create a stable security system (Kang, 2010, pp. 591).

Kang (2010) states that the tributary system was built on a foundation of legitimate Chinese authority and material power that translated into the normative social order of the region by containing credible commitments by China not to exploit secondary states that accepted its authority (pp. 592). While, Hamashita (1997) understood the tribute system as the external expression of hierarchical domestic relations of control, extending downward and outward from China as the imperial center and central to the maintenance of the Sinocentric system of suzerainty (pp. 114). To sum up, the tributary system worked as a network of foreign relations with a state in the center and states on the perimeter, which includes native tribes, provinces and dependencies of the empire, and trading partners. Therefore, the tributary system not only affected East Asia on a regional level but also on an individual level as it shaped every national economy involved in the Imperial Chinese tributary system.

Trading Textiles within the Tributary System

Textiles were one of the most demanded and important commodities flowing around the tributary system. Hamashita (1997) identified cotton textiles as the first tribute article to the Qing Dynasty (pp. 124). Moreover, Kang (2010) examined the Chinese-nomad relationship within the tributary system and expressed that the relationship at its core was about the trading of textiles (pp. 618). The trade of these textiles was essentially what kept the nomads from pillaging and plundering agricultural China. When trading was more advantageous, the nomads traded; but, when trading was difficult or restricted, they raided China's frontier towns to get the goods they needed (Kang, 2010, pp. 618). Thus, it is evident that the trade of textiles was key

for the workings of the tributary system in growing and stabilizing potentially volatile China's foreign relationships with other East Asian countries.

Furthermore, the East Asian state that dominated the textile market was the state with the most economic and material power, as this paper will demonstrate through examining the history of the Chinese and Japanese textile industry.

China's Textile Industry

The Chinese Cotton Revolution

Cotton had a long history of cultivation in China, dating back to the second century AD, however, there was a rapid expansion of cultivation in China during the 12th and 13th centuries (Cantin, 2009, pp. 457). Thus, Cantin (2009) states that some Chinese women have even produced for the market since ancient times, but a distinct female role in textile production for use beyond the household was institutionalized with the rise of the mid-imperial textile industry (pp. 457), which emerged from state demand for textiles for trade and tribute with other Sino-states.

Women in the Imperial Chinese Economy

During this time, the structure of China's economy was built around primarily self-sufficient individual households, that were subject to taxation by the government. In addition, due to the fairly rigid gender divisions in Imperial China, Cantin (2009) states that women were made to produce more than they consumed, and this would generate a surplus of capital or subsistence for the men in the household (pp. 456). As women were put in a position within their household to consume less than they produce, this led them "...

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to yield resources convertible into property belonging to men” (Cantin, 2009, pp. 456-7). Thus, the development of petty commodity production in textiles during the imperial ‘cotton revolution’ was shaped by these existing patriarchal structures and rules for reproduction.

Textiles as a Tax in the Tributary System. As of the 14th century, cotton cultivation had become common all over China, and Zurndorfer (2011) argues this is due to the encouragement of both the Yuan and Ming governments, cotton textile production developed into a thriving rural household activity adding to peasant incomes (pp. 702-3). As cotton textile production was a household activity, this meant it was all done through women’s labour. This also normalized the idea of women entering the workforce and in turn put a higher economic value on women within Imperial China. This was an indirect consequence of the Ming government fostering a tax program that required payment in the form of cotton and/or cotton textiles to the government, which would then be used by the state as tributes and commodities to trade within the tributary system (Zurndorfer, 2011, pp. 708). By 1800, cotton cloth was China’s second most important trade commodity after grain. (Zurndorfer, 2011, pp. 703).

The Fall of the Chinese Textile Industry. However, by 1790s, the cotton industry had already begun declining due to the ecological destruction it caused and since Imperial China was faced with other political issues, it did not have a full range of resources available to deal with its cotton industry (Zurndorfer, 2011, pp. 731). This was the moment Japan gained its economic rise in the region through the building their textile industry, which also used primarily female labour.

Japan's Economic Rise

One of the main obstacles for Japanese modernization was in dealing with the Chinese dominance over commercial relations in Asia, the same dominance that had functioned as the base for the Sinocentric economic integration through the tributary, and to figure out a way to place itself as the hegemon of this existing system (Hamashita, 1997, pp. 128). Japan attempted to expand its commercial relations but that had failed, as Chinese merchants had already held a solid monopoly on seafood and native Japanese commodities. Then, Chinese merchants in Japan provided the information needed to start a modern cotton textile industry capable of competing with Western cotton textiles for a share of the Chinese market (Hamashita, 1997, pp. 129-130). This was mutually beneficial for both states, as the Chinese textile industry was already outcompeted by Western textiles and it is much easier to buy textiles from a country within the tributary system, and as for Japan, this created a new industry that gave rise to Japanese economic power within the region.

In the 19th year of Meiji, Chinese merchants started buying cotton cloth produced in Saitama prefecture (Hamashita, 1997, pp. 130). Afterwards, Chinese merchants advised the Japanese to produce cloth in bolts as wide as that sold by the West at a competitive price, which led to the production of substitutes for Western textiles in Asia (Hamashita, 1997, pp. 130). The textile industry was a key component of the Japanese modernization project up to the 1930s, accounting for the largest share of total manufacturing production, and much of the manufacturing labour force (Hunter, 2003, pp. 1).

Women in Japan's Textile Industry

The low cost of female labour in the Meiji cotton plants was central to the rapid rise to prominence in both domestic and foreign markets. In the 1800s, the chief weapon in the arsenal of Japanese silk manufacturers waging economic war in international markets was the low wages they paid their female labour (Tsurumi, 1995, pp. 17). Tsurumi (1995) states "... the fingertip skill of the young women bending over the cocoon basins, not efficient machinery or a high grade of raw materials that made possible the silk manufacturers' profits" (pp. 17).

Japanese Gendered Constructs. Both before 1914 and afterwards, textile work was widely understood as a short-phase in a woman's life since the state immediately needed labour to industrialize but did not see women participating in the workforce as a permanent reality in Japan (Hunter, 2003, pp. 5). The growing importance of female workers in both factory and small-scale textile production was accompanied by increasing gender segmentation of occupation within the textile industry. More and more the minority of male workers were assigned to jobs that required either more skill (Hunter & Macnaughtan, 2010, pp. 16). However, the gendered segregation of low-skilled and high-skilled labour created in this period was not static; however, underlying assumptions regarding gender continued to condition the operation of the textile labour market throughout the prewar years (Hunter, 2003, pp. 5). Consequently, the institutions that characterized the textile industry had a lasting influence in shaping the highly gender-segmented labour market that characterized Japan throughout the twentieth century.

Conclusion

While it can be said that women were essential to the tributary system by understanding women's labour through social reproduction feminism alone; by arguing that if it were not for the activities women perform that regenerate the worker outside the production process, child care, elder care, and childbirth, the tributary system would not be possible. However, it is also important to examine actual female workers participating in an industry essential to the tributary system that has also been overlooked. In the case of Imperial China, the textile industry gained huge momentum the moment the government required taxation in the form of cotton textiles for the tributary system, which meant the demand for domestic textile production of women increased as this textile production was historically dominated by women and with it increased the economic value of women in Imperial Chinese society. Second, Japanese industrialized through the mass profits made by their textile industry that also came out of the tributary system, which initially only made women enter the workforce out of economic necessity but eventually kept women in these subpar working conditions and low-skilled employment. Thus, it cannot be overstated the impact that women had on the East Asian tributary system, and in turn, the system has also shaped the ways in which women are allowed to enter the public realm.

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