Introduction from the Guest Editor

Women’s Work, Virtue and Space:
Change from Early to Late Imperial China

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This special issue of the Journal of East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine presents three essays that address the little explored subject of elite women and their textile work in the Lower Yangzi region during late imperial China. Grounded in art historical analyses of textile artifacts, Alexandra Tunstall, I-Fen Huang, and Yuhang Li (in the chronological order of their subjects) discuss three exceptional cases of innovation in textile technology, respectively, fine silk kesi weaving in the Southern Song (1127-1279), Gu embroidery and hair embroidery in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (1644-1911).¹

¹ These three papers were first presented at Panel #248, “The Boudoir Arts of Late Imperial China,” at the annual meeting of The Association for Asian Studies, Chicago, March 29, 2009. The organizer of this panel, Alexandra Tunstall, invited Dorothy Ko and Marsha Haufler (Weidner) as commentators and myself as the chair. Following Dorothy Ko’s suggestion, the three papers were initially planned to be published with my own paper on Huang Daopo, the female textile legend of Yuan dynasty, that I had presented at the 12th International Conference on the History of Science in East Asia, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA on July 18, 2008. However, I withdrew it so as not to hold up the publication with major revisions. Hence, a short overview to set the three articles in context. I
As the paths of art historians and historians of science and technology rarely cross, this publication breaks new ground in offering both authors and readers a broadened perspective on the complex historical junctures of women innovating textile crafts to have produced noteworthy pictorial representations. For this wonderful opportunity, we must first thank the editors of the journal for their warm welcome. Second, gratitude is owed to Dorothy Ko for her support by writing a theoretical framework for situating issues of gender in late imperial China (see Epilogue). Finally, all three essays greatly benefited from a close reading by the two anonymous readers. We thank them for asking hard questions and suggesting ways to refine arguments. A dominant issue raised by the two readers concerns the ambiguities about “women’s work.” Here I would like to review some salient terms designating textiles and textile technology and show how the notion of women’s work as a metaphor for women’s virtue changed over time, resulting in a subtle shift of boundaries in women’s social space in late imperial China.3

Change in Women’s Work as Metaphor for Women’s Virtue

The notion of gendered work in traditional China can be traced to the familiar Han Chinese precept of “men till and women weave” (nan geng nü zhi 男耕女織) that political philosophers already advocated in the fifth century BCE.4 The division of labor was understood as necessary to sustain...
a subsistence living for commoners and for them to pay taxes to the state in an agricultural economy. From when Confucianism gained currency as orthodoxy then, the notion of men tilling and women weaving entailed a political vision of social order, imbuing the work with moral authority (Hinsch 2003).

Nowhere was this clearer than as revealed in the first chapter of the *Debate on Salt and Iron* (*Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論), Huan Kuan’s 桓寬 record of the arguments that Confucian scholars presented to the chief minister against his fiscal policies after Emperor Wu’s death in 81 BCE. To finance his military campaigns against the Xiongnu, Emperor Wu had instituted state monopolies on salt, iron and liquor production. These enterprises also benefited the middlemen and merchants. Thus, the literati’s position in the debate, to revive prior laissez-faire policies must be viewed against their vested interest in maintaining their superior social standing, lording over the merchant class. The Confucian literati claimed: “… when the ancients levied taxes on the people, the ancients judged according to what the people produced and did not seek that which the people were inept to make. [Hence,] farmers paid taxes with what they obtained [from the land] and women workers offered their efforts [at textile-making] (*gong* 功).”

That the women’s work (*nügong* 女工) in question referred to textile-making, and even more specifically, to weaving, can be surmised from the text a few sentences further down where the Confucian scholars referred to some officials requisitioning “cloths and floss” (*bu xu* 布絮) that not only included silks (*jian* 縣 of extended warp and weft in tabby weave) from the kingdom of Qi 齊 and of Tao 陶 as well as cloths (*bu* 布 of plant fibers) from Shu 蜀 and Han 漢 but also that which was produced by the people. Moreover, the Confucian scholars concluded that this requisitioning taxed the women workers twice (by asking for extra textiles in addition to the regular tax).
Simple Plain Weaves

Thus, the Confucian scholars of early Han dynasty and by extension, the bureaucracy and the state, viewed “women’s work” as weaving of textiles in both silk and plant fibers. Note, however, that the abovementioned nomenclature refers to textiles that were woven in the simplest binding structure of tabby, where half of the warps on the loom would be raised and lowered to make an opening (called the “shed”) for the shuttle carrying the weft to be passed through. The result would be a plain textile (without pattern or ornamentation) where each warp goes over one weft and then under another and so forth. (Fig. 1) Whereas tabbies woven with the silk fiber were called first bo 绸 and then later, juan 绢, tabbies woven with plant fibers such as the hemp and ramie were called mabu 麻布 and zhuma bu 増麻布 or simply abbreviated as bu 布.9

As commoners used plain tabbies of silk or hemp and ramie for making everyday clothing and for tax payment, women who wove these plain tabbies kept their families warm and contributed to the overall welfare of the state. For these reasons, these women were seen as virtuous. The state collected and redistributed both grain and textiles for various purposes including that of remuneration for civil and military personnel. In contrast to perishable grain, plain weaves were enduring, easy to transport, standardized and thus were also used as currency (Sheng 2013). Such weaving of plain tabbies on simple looms was basic, performed in nearly every peasant household in early China. It was so basic and commonplace that everyone, regardless social strata, easily understood the weaving metaphor as women’s work and women’s virtue. They also absorbed the implicit meaning of women’s work, just like that of men’s work, as an integral part of social order.

Exemplary Women and their Views on Women’s Work

Both extant texts and pictorial representations (by and for the elites) provide evidence for the widespread understanding and internalization of moral values. Yet if this was ever expressed by commoners, it was rarely captured. What texts we have of the elite women astound.10 In reaction to the blatant indulgences of Emperor Cheng’s 成帝 (r. 32-7 BCE) favorite consort Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 who was then promoted to Empress Xiaocheng

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8 For the clearest definitions of textile terms in English, consult Burnham (1980).
9 Terms vary in western languages as well, for example, silk tabby is taffeta, and cotton tabby, toile in French.
10 For an analysis of how the Chinese state promoted Confucian virtues, see Elvin (1984).
孝成皇后，刘向（79-8 BCE），自己是皇宫的贵族，编纂了《烈女传》（Biographies of Exemplary Women）作为对女性的道德劝诫于前汉末期（202 BCE-8 CE）。该传记由季敬姜，鲁国的脂小史，对其理解了纺织和织机的一段陈述：当她的儿子文伯成为鲁国的总理时，季敬姜就建议他使用织机作为比喻。她称并分析了织机的各个部分，并将它们与具有类似功能的官职进行了比较。例如，轴（zhou）用来保持织物的直和卷，就像一名总理。[12] 然而，最重要的是经。[13] 经是出现在机两端的纵向线，由织工坐于机上而将要被织入机中的纵向线。如果没有将经铺展在机上，一个必要的但不充分的条件，那么也就没有纺织。如果机是国家的框架，以及它的部分官员是官僚制度，那么经就是那些必须被平直（统治）和用道德的纤维，即纬（furuang）来穿的人民，因此，织机的隐喻意义也就得以体现。季敬姜将她敏锐的对纺织作为比喻对女性的善行的掌握甚至推广到国家的治理，因此证明了她的道德权威，并在儒家父权制和性别化的劳动的复杂和细微权力斗争中展示了自己。[14] 这是一个话题，是三个文章微妙揭示的精英女性在后来时代的主题。尽管季敬姜的观点被一个男性学者记录在一本文献中，但主流的意识形态是如此根深蒂固，以至于即使是精英女性也要同样的说教。其第一女性历史学家，班昭（45-116）汉代，写《女诫》（Admonitions for Women）为像她这样的精英女性的益处。在第四章《妇行》中，她命名为女性应追求的四种行为：妇德（fude），妇言（fuyan），妇容（furong）和

[11] Lienü zhuan，juan 1, 6b-9b.
[12] Zhou keyi wei xiang 軸可以為相. See Lienü zhuan, juan 1, 7b.
[13] Zhi guo zhi yao jin zai jing ye 治國之要盡在經也. See Lienü zhuan, juan 1, 7a.
[14] For a revisionist view of the early exemplary women, see also Raphals (1998).
womanly effort (fugong 婦功).

She further explicates: “According to Confucius, womanly behavior means no need to excel in any talents; womanly speech means no need to debate with a sharp mouth; womanly countenance means no need to beautify one’s face and body; and womanly effort means no need to work more craftily than others.”

More details follow for each.

Focusing on the last, womanly effort (fugong 婦功), we learn that Ban Zhao meant by it “concentrate on spinning and weaving, do not flirt, prepare food and wine and offer to guests.”

Here we see that women’s textile work, both spinning and weaving, constituted but one aspect of “womanly effort.”

If textual descriptions of looms in the Han dynasty served as metaphors, so too did pictorial representations. Unearthed from various parts of northern, central and southern China, nine incised stone slabs, dated to the Eastern Han (25-220 CE), feature each a woman weaving at a loom (Fig. 2). They all repeat the story of the Confucian disciple Zengzi 曾子 having been accused of murder and his mother defending his honor, claiming this accusation false because of his consistent ethical behavior, a fundamental Confucian virtue. The woman is always shown as having been interrupted of her weaving at the loom, in a contra posto posture, speaking to a kneeled man (either the son or the messenger). Viewed in a broader context, illustrations of this story, like those of many other Confucian stories such as those of filial piety, reflected the scholar-official elite’s strategy to protest against the domination of the aristocracy by presenting their own moral superiority in visual form.

Driven by the Confucian ideology that served the interests of the omnipresent patriarchy, the didactic narrative out-

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15 Nüjie, collected in Wang Xiang (ed.) 2011, pp. 1-19. Thanks to Cheng Min, a former colleague at McMaster University, for expediting this source from Beijing.

16 Nüjie, collected in Wang Xiang (ed.) 2011, p.11: 夫云妇德，不必才明绝异也；妇言，不必辩口利辞也；妇容，不必颜色美丽也；妇功，不必工巧过人也。

17 Nüjie, collected in Wang Xiang (ed.) 2011, p. 12: 专心纺绩，不好戏笑，洁齐酒食（齐音齋），以奉宾客，是谓妇功。

18 Five slabs were discovered in Shandong: Hongdaoyuan 洪道院 and Longyangdian 龍陽店 of Tengxian 滕縣, Wu Liang ci 武梁祠 at Jiaxiangxian 嘉祥縣, Guo Ju ci 郭巨祠 at Xiaotangshan 孝堂山 of Feicheng 肥城; three from Jiangsu: Liuchengzhen 留成鎮 of Peixian 沛縣, Honglou 洪樓 of Tongshanxian 鐘山縣, and Caozhuang 曹庄 of Sihongxian 泗洪縣; and one from Chengdu of Sichuan: Zengjiabao 曾家包 at Tuqiao 土橋 in Chengdu. (Chen Weiji, 1984, pp. 198-199).

19 Martin J. Powers argues that distinctions among literal, critical, and rhetorical styles served the political agenda of the Confucian elite, see his seminal Art and Political Expression in Early China (1991).
weighed the textile technology in significance. The stylistic simplicity of the incised images also synchronized with their advocacy for frugality as virtue.

**Luxuries as Metaphor for Moral Depravity**

In contrast to plain weaving as a metaphor for women’s work and women’s virtue, embroidery and other techniques of ornamentation spoke of depraved indulgence in luxury by the rich. Even before the writing of the *Salt and Iron Debate and Biography of Exemplary Women*, thus petitioned the political adviser, Chao Cuo 鼂錯 (c. 200-154 BCE), to Emperor Wen 文帝 in 178 BCE: “Big merchants accumulated goods and increased profits, small merchants sat displays and sold wares … several times over [the cost]. Therefore, men of this background did not till the land and their women did not tend sericulture and weave; they wore only patterned clothing, ate only meat [and gourmet food] …”

This trend must have continued unabated as it warranted an imperial edict in the second year of Emperor Jing’s 景帝 reign (155 BCE): “… any carving of patterns and incising of design damaged agriculture; patterned weave, embroideries and such handiwork harmed women’s work (nühong 女紅). The source of hunger is damaged agriculture; and the origin of [feeling] cold, harmed women’s work.”

A short but essential note on the Chinese characters for “women’s work” is in place here. We have seen it written in two characters as woman craft/work (nügong 女工) in Huan Kuan’s *Salt and Iron Debate*, not to be confused with "woman’s effort" (fugong 婦功) of which it is but one part in Ban Zhao’s *Admonitions to Women*. Here, in Emperor Jing’s edict, though nühong (女紅) means literally “woman red,” the word “red” is made of the silk radical on the left and “craft” on the right; hence it should be understood as textile-related craft.

Back to Emperor Jing’s edict, clearly, the implications were that men who carved wood to embellish the beams for housing were removed from cultivating grain in the fields and that women who wove fancy weaves and made embroideries, braids and so forth—all time-consuming activities—were removed from weaving simple tabbies for their families’ clothing need. The edict continued with a promise from the emperor himself that he would personally till the field and the empress personally tend the

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20 而商賈大者積貯倍息，小者坐列販賣，。。。所賣必倍。故其男不耕耘，女不蠶織，衣必文采，食必粱肉。。。。 See Xi Han huiyao (1977), juan 50, vol. 2, p. 583.

mulberry (leaves of which were fed to the silkworms) to offer grain and textiles to the ancestral temple and set an example for all (their subjects) under heaven.

Not only did this edict clarify how superfluous handiwork harmed women’s work and women’s virtue, but it also exposed, as an ancient concept, that virtuous women’s work extended to the entire process of textile-making, beginning with the nurturing of mulberry trees and by none other than the empress herself. While the emperor and empress shared the gendered work of “men till and women weave” to maintain social order and as witnessed by the ancestors at the temple, they set the macrocosmic model for all men and women to follow at the microcosmic level of the household. I will elaborate on the asymmetry of the gendered division further below.

Women could be engaged in sericulture and weaving, but only the weaving of simple tabbies was deemed worthy. These simple tabbies were plain and unadorned, even frugal. Unlike them, patterned textiles, whether monochromatic or polychrome and woven in any fiber (plant or silk), required extra raw materials and extra manipulation that meant more time and more complex technologies. In short, patterned textiles were luxuries. Certainly, they were produced in state workshops to supply the court and the aristocracy, as only state workshops commanded unlimited resources (Kuhn 1995 and Sheng 1995). Shortly after the time of the Salt and Iron Debate, private workshops also emerged to meet the needs of the nouveaux riches in the first century. Women workers in such state-owned and private workshops, some even left evidence as master craftsmen, produced luxuries for the aristocracy and the wealthy. Such women workers were not to be confused with commoner women doing virtuous work in their homes.

Luxuries, New Weaves, and Implications

What were the luxurious weaves so detested by the Han Confucian scholars? Archaeological finds at Number One Chu Tomb at Jiangling, Mashan 馬山 (Hubei) dated to c. 340-278 BCE and at Number One Han Tomb at Mawangdui 馬王堆, Changsha 長沙 (Hunan) dated to 168 BCE confirm early mastery of the patterned 軸綺 (warp-faced tabby with 3/1 twill), plain and patterned silk gauze, 阉羅, and above all, the polychrome

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22 For the concept of unequal symmetry, thanks go to Kate Lingley who inspired me with her paper entitled “Paired Male and Female Donor Images of the Northern Dynasties” that she presented at Panel 298 “Seeing Double? Paired Imagery in Buddhist Art” at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in Toronto, March 17, 2012.
warp-faced compound tabby, *jing jin* 經錦 (*jingxianhua jiawei jingerchong pingwen* 經顯花夾緯經二重平紋) for which early Chinese enjoyed renown.\(^23\) The Period of Disunity (220-581) witnessed many innovations in silk weaving in northwestern and central northern China. Notably, the weaving of more complex binding structures such as the twill (*xiewen* 斜紋) and in combination with the tabby to form patterns on silks called *ling* 綾 which, if monochromatic, could be compared to later damask weaves in Europe (most often in linen). Such silk twill weaves indicated more complex loom technologies, with increased control of individual warps and wefts for purposes of repeating patterns in both the warp and weft. Other new structures for polychrome patterned silks ensued, some in the subsequent Sui (581-618) and Tang dynasties (618-907): warp-faced compound twill (*jingxianhua jiawei jingerchong xiewen* 經顯花夾緯經二重斜紋), weft-faced compound tabby or taqueté (*weixianhua hanxin weierchong pingwen* 緯顯花含心緯二重平紋), weft-faced compound twill or samitum (*weixianhua hanxin weierchong xiewen* 緯顯花含心緯二重斜紋)—all indiscriminately referred to as *jin* 錦 in most Chinese extant texts. Geographically, other centers of textile manufacture than those in the north sprang up, such as Chengdu in the Sichuan Basin.\(^24\)

Local specialization of various patterned weaves began to emerge. Tribute data of the Tang shows that in addition to the plain weaves in silk and plant fibers, some prefectures offered patterned weaves to the state as local tribute (*tugong* 土貢). For example, Caizhou 蔡州 in the north offered silk twill weaves (*ling* 綾) and silk floss as taxes (*fu* 賦) and as tribute (*gong* 貢), more specialized silk twills patterned with turtles and paired birds during the Kaiyuan 開元 period (713-756) but switched to silk twills with a new and different pattern of four roundels amidst clouds. In the Lower Yangzi region, Runzhou 潼州 offered raw silk, cloths of ramie and hemp as taxes and as tribute, patterned silk twills *ling* 綾 and silks patterned with herbal dyes (*zayao* 雜藥). New varieties of silks were also lavishly praised in Tang poetry that celebrated women’s beauty and romance.\(^25\)

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\(^{23}\) For the archaeological finds, see Hubei (1985) and Shanghaishi (1980). Often erroneously translated as brocades, the patterns of which are made in the weft with continuous shots of the shuttle, *jing jin* 經錦 could be referred to as such or warp-faced silks with polychrome patterns.

\(^{24}\) How and why remain hotly debated, see Sheng (1999), Wu Min (2006) and Zhao Feng (2006).

The well-documented Tang-Song transition saw rapid market expansion and commercialization of many commodities, especially in the fertile Lower Yangzi region (Shiba 1988). The southward relocation of the capital to Hangzhou in 1127 also further stimulated population growth. There, *grosso modo*, the multiple crops of Champa rice each year greatly increased the food supply (Bol 2008, p. 17), resulting in the release of more agricultural labor into crafts and trade on the one hand and on the other hand, a slow but sure burgeoning capacity and desire for the consumption of luxuries.

For example, even at a cursory reading of the *Dongjing menghua lu* (東京夢華錄) (The Dream of Hua in the Eastern Capital), a book written in the 1130s by Meng Yuanlao 孟元老 (c. 1090-1150), purported to be about the glories of the Northern Song capital of Kaifeng, one could not fail but to appreciate the niceties of life already accessible to and enjoyed by commoners in the twelfth century.26 Certainly in Zhang Zeduan’s 張澤端 (1085-1145) painting entitled *Qingming shanghe tu* (清明上河圖) (Along the River during the Qingming Festival), probably also depicting the bustling urban life in Kaifeng, we notice along taverns and other shops a textile boutique with such worded sign (*buzhuang* 布莊) on a vertical banner.27

It is no surprise then that the increased demand for variety also stimulated rural innovations in textile technology. One significant consequence for our consideration here was that the weaving of simple cloths became commercialized from the Southern Song (1127-1279) onward (Sheng 1990, pp. 180-201). Not only did poor women sell their weavings and other textile work, men also joined workshops to produce these new varieties of cloths. This commercial development, however, only served to make women’s textile work at home an even more poignant metaphor for female virtue and social stability. But the exact content of textile work changed from the Song to the Qing.

By the nineteenth century, elite women no longer spoke of weaving plain silks and cloths but rather of embroidery. Ding Pei 丁佩 was born in Huating 華亭 (modern Songjiang 松江 near Shanghai), or possibly in Suzhou, and married into the great Chen lineage 陳氏 of Yinchuan 潁川 that can be traced to the Eastern Han.28 As an embroiderer herself, she

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26 See also Gernet (1962).
27 Kept at the Palace Museum in Beijing.
28 The lineage of Ding Pei’s husband moved from northern to southern China sometime in the fourth century, due to the strife of war, and re-established as a great lineage of Fujian. For a more detailed discussion on Ding Pei and her text on embroidery, see Fong (2004), pp. 26-35.
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wrote a book on it, Xiu pu 繡譜 (Notes on Embroidery). In her own preface dated 1821, her very first words were: “Work is the last of the four virtues and embroidery is the most special of women’s work.”

What had happened? How did virtuous women’s work change from plain weaving to fine needlework—both the fine silk kesi weaving with needle-like bobbins and embroidery? The three cases discussed in this issue by Tunstall, Huang, and Li point to a period of fluid transition that started in the late Song when men began to produce new varieties of cloths commercially. Had male textile workers usurped the moral work of women? Had the commodification of the textile-making process and of simple weaves made it nearly impossible for women to work on their textile work at home? The critical factor, as these essays will show, was where the women worked to produce women’s virtue.

I will now examine the change in women’s space to suggest that these elite women presented in the three essays began to renegotiate their gendered work to maintain their virtue while expanding the boundaries of their social space.

Change in Women’s Space as Metaphor for Subordination

From early times, the traditional Han Chinese division of gendered labor also marked a clear spatial separation of the sexes: men tilled the open fields to grow grain as food outside the house, and inside the house, women wove cloths (plain weaves) to dress their families for warmth and modesty. Even if the reality deviated from this idealized vision, this spatial demarcation was so well integrated into the consciousness that when speaking to people outside the family household, a man referred to his wife as “the person inside” (neiren 内人) and his wife, in turn, referred to him as “the person outside” (waizi 外子). Still in active usage among polite

Interestingly, projected moral values of needlework were amply painted by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) in seventeenth-century Holland. Marjorie E. Wieseman shows that embroidery and lace-making were refined “productive pastime” for young ladies of the upper classes and as well, the textiles constituted valuable possessions. See Wieseman (2011), p. 55.

工居四德之末而繡又特女工. See Xiu pu, vol. 1 1, Book 32-2-7, 219. Note that Ding Pei had now substituted “craft” for “effort” in the earlier Han text, Ban Zhao’s Admonitions for Women.

For more elaboration on rise of the gendered space in early China, see Hinsch (2003), pp. 600-604.
overseas Chinese society today, these terms of reference with spatial meanings reflect a deep anxiety to separate the sexes out of concern for propriety.

This fundamental spatial separation entailed a gender inequity that was articulated through kinship and intergenerational hierarchy (Gates 1989, p. 801). The gendered space inside and outside a house functioned to subordinate women to the male head of the household whether as father, husband, or son. Of course, other men in the household also had to obey the patriarch, but primogeniture ensured that the eldest son would inherit this role one day and the other younger sons could each potentially leave the household by setting up his own family, joining the army or even a monastery. Not so for the women. A woman could leave her native family by marriage (including betrothal as a concubine), by renunciation of her reproductive role as in seeking refuge in a nunnery and, in extreme cases, by sale into prostitution and by suicide.

Nor was the spatial separation symmetric and equal. Somewhat simplified, the inner world within the private household, including environs such as gardens or courtyards, was a finite space and all the relationships within the household hierarchically organized. In contrast, the outer, public world was open and full of possibilities. A man who went outside of his household certainly still bowed to the authorities, the ultimate of which being the Emperor, but outside his household a man could also find equality among peers and even superiority over others in different political, social and economic contexts. The asymmetry between the outer and inner world did not alter much for women although they could visit close relatives living nearby, sweep tombs of those dead, or even go on pilgrimage to temples farther afield. Having earned their place in the family as grandmothers, older women enjoyed more freedom and mobility.31

Madam Ji Jingjiang on Women’s Space

The abovementioned Madam Ji Jingjiang, who had advised her son, the prime minister of the state of Lu, on statecraft in the first century BCE, was also explicit on the women’s domain. Her understanding of space was both gendered and hierarchically organized, as the following story would illustrate. One day when she went to call on her grandnephew, Ji Kangzi 季康子, when he was at court. Though spoken to, she did not reply. Later, after he returned from court, he went to find out if somehow he was at fault. She replied: “Have you not heard? The Son of Heaven and his

nobleman discuss affairs of the people in the outer court and those of the deities, in the inner court. High-ranking officials discuss their official work outside [the home], and their family matters inside [the home]. Inside the bedroom, women rule their affairs. [This distinction between outside and inside] is consistent from top down. Outside, you were busy with your official work and inside, with Ji family business—both spaces are beyond what I can comment."

This lesson reveals that women could only act and speak within the confines of their bedroom—rather extreme in the interpretation of the inside versus the outside as space for social interaction. Note that for Madame Ji Jingjiang, the inside and outside also marked the separation of the secular from the sacred, and that of a man’s work, service at court, from his home.

Early Han Chinese Official View of Space

One theory on the early ethnic Han Chinese (and majority) view of space can shed light on this demarcation. A historian specializing in China and border relations in antiquity, Nicola Di Cosmo, reads early Chinese texts on the nomads as “expressions of forms of knowledge—mythological, astrological, pseudo-geographical” and extracts two notions of geographic space in pre-imperial Han Chinese thinking (Di Cosmo 2002, pp. 94-95). The first notion was the representation of the land as a system of inscribed squares and the second, the representation of the world as divided into nine continents or provinces. Di Cosmo argues that these two notions reflect the superimposition of political and ethical considerations “onto a pseudo-geographic grid in an idealized scheme.” From the centre, the Chinese rulers radiated their political and moral control.

Di Cosmo’s theory shows that the early (ethnic majority) Han Chinese official view of a physical space did not focus on its physical attributes as might have had their nomadic neighbors, but rather how a physical space could be, indeed, must be applied with political and moral rules for behavior within that space. Di Cosmo has culled the Han Chinese official view of space from a comparison of their worldview, as settled farmers governed by a centralized state, with that of the pastoral nomadic. In fact, since only elite males staffed the bureaucracy, the Han Chinese official view of space was a gendered one, one articulated by elite men. The Han

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32 敬姜嘗如季氏。康子在朝，與之言，不應，從之，及寢門，不應而入。康子辭於朝，而入見曰：「肥也不得聞命，毋乃罪耶？」敬姜對曰：「子不聞耶？天子及諸侯合民事於內朝，自卿大夫以下合官職於外朝，合家事於內朝，寢門之內，婦人治其職焉。上下同之。夫外朝子將業君之官職焉，內朝子將匹季氏之政焉，皆非吾所敢言也。See Lienü zhuan, p. 31).
Chinese society was so well immersed in it that Madam Ji Jingjiang—spouse, mother, and grandaunt of three Lu officials, could summarize it succinctly as seen above.

Certainly, Di Cosmo’s understanding of the early Han Chinese as having inscribed geographic space with political and ethical concerns is borne out by an analysis of early ancestral temples. Art historian Wu Hung argues that the monumentality of the royal temple complex resides in its interrelated two aspects: meaning of ancestral groupings and the symbolism of the temple’s structures (Wu Hung 1995, p. 82) (Fig. 3). Wu Hung then proceeds to show how similar principles used to manipulate the sacred space (temples) were transferred to establish hierarchy and order in the secular and mixed space (palaces and tombs) (Wu Hung 1995, p. 88).

Wu Hung’s analysis of the macrocosmic monumentality from temples to palaces to tombs can be extended to the microcosmic miniaturization of social order in the dwelled space called the family house. Just as the Han Chinese emperor ruled his empire (space) and subjects on the macrocosmic scale, so too on the microcosmic, did the Han Chinese male head of each household ruled his house (space) and his kin. The space in question—both of the state and of the family household—was contested at different times in Chinese history. However, the contestation of the space at home has largely escaped historians’ notice but is clearly evident in the change of women’s virtuous work over time, from plain weaving to fancy needlework as discussed in the three essays.

Both Di Cosmo and Wu Hung offer a historical gaze at the early Han Chinese official view of space that shows its functioning within a framework very much imbued with what came to be institutionalized as Confucian values. But, how did people actually behave in social space?

**Han Chinese Behavior in Space**

A contemporary study on the traditional use of space can serve as a paradigm for reflection on how people in late imperial China might have behaved in social space. Anthropologist Liu Xin went to a single-surnamed village, Zhaojiahe 趙家河, along the Zhao Family River administered by Leijiawa 雷家洼 township, Chengcheng 澄城 county, the Weinan 渭南 district of Shaanxi province, just north of Xi’an in 1991 to find out how socialism brought by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had impacted on the traditional way of life there, and, if there was a change in how people behaved from before the Cultural Revolution to afterward (Liu Xin 2000).

For our purposes, we are specifically interested in Liu Xin’s analysis of the traditional cave dwellings (tuyao 土窯) in which the two hundred
households lived. Liu Xin maps out an intricate and overlapping use of the dark, interior space. The male head of the household usually sat at the table where, as host (insider), he entertained visiting guests (outsiders) with food and drink. The male head of the household was also the “outside person” relative to his wife, the “inside person.” While as such he was associated with the table positioned close to the doorway, his wife was linked to the bed, not directly visible from the doorway, and the deep recess of storage (family wealth) (Fig. 4).

Also carved into cliffs, a pair of such caves but with a larger courtyard served as the community quarters where the local CPP cadres often held town-hall meetings. One would have thought that since socialism brought political and economic equality to the poor and lower-middle class residents who frequented such meetings, they would position themselves to reflect their new sense of equality. However, Liu Xin found that the cadres sat in chairs at the table, just like each male head of the household in his own cave home, facing the doorway and the lower-ranking attendees who brought their own backless benches, occupying less visual space than chairs with backs, the lower the social rank, the closer to the door (italics mine). One might even extrapolate and imagine the twentieth-century party cadre occupying the seat of authority in a similar way as did the local magistrate in pre-modern China, who represented the Emperor in ruling the locals.

In short, Liu Xin observed that the locals were governed by familiar rules they practiced at home on a daily basis, “simply an unconscious application of the domestic spatial hierarchy to a new form of social organization” (Liu Xin 2000, 49). His research demonstrates the tenacity of Confucian space separated by hierarchy and by gender that even the most radical socialist revolution (in property and ownership) could not alter. This was a social practice deeply embedded in memory. In other words, the locals continued a behavior that they had learned experientially since birth by observation, practice, and social reinforcement and from one generation to the next. By experiential learning, both those in the position of authority (CCP cadres) and those they ruled (the poor and lower-middle class) continued to reproduce the Confucian spatial division by gender and

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33 In addition to the rational kind of intellectual learning, humans also learn experientially in the body, to wit the transmission of traditional Chinese medical knowledge (Hsi 1999). Experiential learning figures prominently in the frontier field of embodied cognition. The central thesis places cognition (perception and action) within the context of a real-world environment, which, in turn, serves as a repository for the results of a cognitive experience, retrieved when necessary (Wilson 2002). The corporeal embodiment as a historical process has been applied to understanding contemporary social change (Parr 2010, pp. 1-23). It has also served to reinterpret the past (Moskowitz 2009).
hierarchy, with political and ethical implications, that had been predetermined by the male Confucian scholar elite.

Did the perception and use of space remain the same from early Han time to late imperial China or, did it deviate?

Change in Elite Women’s Space from Han onward

Madam Ji Jingjiang of early Han times, we recall, already articulated spatial demarcation by hierarchy, gender, and use. After the Han dynasty collapsed in 220, however, women in the north seemed to have gained more ground during the nomadic rule. Women in the sixth century handled legal disputes and even represented their men folk at government offices, definitely having stepped out from their previous confines of the bedroom, and even their house! In the seventh century we saw a woman supplanting the “Son of Heaven” in Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690-705). Her daughter the Taiping Princess 太平公主 (d. 713) and Empress Wei 韋皇后 (d. 710) continued political domination over the empire for a time.34

In addition to political power, many Tang princesses also demanded personal including sexual freedom. For example, they rode horses for pleasure outdoors, greatly expanding their space for amusing activities and social interaction. Indoors, at leisure, they wore gowns of décolleté and wraps made of diaphanous silks—the height of fashion that also overtly revealed the upper body as an erogenous zone.35

Tang princesses of daring sports and audacious dress also divorced and remarried in unprecedented numbers (Lewis 2009, pp. 180-182). Few ambitious men wanted such trouble and avoided marrying into the imperial family. Instead, officials continued the earlier practice of offering substantive betrothal gifts to have their sons marry into the old, prominent families for political alliance. After Neo-Confucianists revived the ideology of patriarchy and patrilocality in the Song, gender inequity returned with a vengeance and persisted to late imperial China. No elite women ever did again don dress of such unprecedented sartorial audacity nor did they ride horses and play polo outdoors as princesses in the Tang until modern times.

Not coincidentally, the practice of footbinding, initially spotted on foreign dancers, grew popular from the Song onward. The maimed feet were

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35 Murals in the tomb of Princess Yongtai 永泰 (d. 701), granddaughter of Empress Wu Zetian and Emperor Gaozong, feature palace maidservants with cleavage, poets in Tang praised half-exposed breasts, and Zhou Fang 周坊 (730-800) painted court ladies showing bare shoulders and arms underneath transparent outer robes. See Huang Nengfu and Chen Juanjuan (1999), pp. 206-215. Excavated tomb textiles and figurines bear witness to both textual and pictorial records.
now contained in shoes euphemistically called “three cun (inches) of golden lilies.” This displacement from the body to the shoe reflected not only the change of the erogenous zone from the exposed bosom of the Tang to the later hidden feet, but also a literal and reinforced confinement of the women in the body and at home.

The practice of footbinding effectively returned elite women back to the Confucian model of restricted social space. It seemed that in the eighteenth century, elite women in the north lived in the inner courts of a typical elite courtyard family compound (siheyuan 四合院). A drawing of the compound (Fig. 5) resembles the reconstructed temple-palace structure of Western Zhou. As one stepped in from the bright outside, one moved toward the dark interior space—from the secular to the sacred space of the temple, and from the gendered male to female space in a family house (see Fig 4 above and recall Madam Ji Jingjiang’s lesson for her grandnephew). Due to the warmer climate, houses in the Lower Yangzi region, and even further south and west, were built of lighter materials than those in the north but essentially followed the same plans with some variations. The “inner quarters,” often located on the second floor toward the back of the compound, provided the social space for elite women of the Ming and Qing time. Elite women such as those presented in the three essays made their textile work in their boudoirs, far away from the main gate (Liang Sicheng 1989, pp. 252-255). Yet, they also thereby enlarged their social space.

Negotiations for Change

Groundbreaking research has shown just how much gentry women in the late Ming and early Qing times wrote poetry, painted images, and exchanged them in their social milieu. They might have had to write in the poetic language and paint in genres established by men since the mid first millennium; however, by the mid-seventeenth century when they circu-

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36 For a seminal discourse on this subject, see Ko (2005). The tiny shoes became erotically charged after the sixteenth century, especially in the south, when wooden high heels grew in vogue (Ko 2005, p. 131).


lated their self-expressions, they self-consciously emulated each other. In their efforts to gain recognition by peers outside their boudoirs, these writing, painting and embroidering elite women followed a pre-determined framework for cultural production deeply steeped in Confucianism. Recent analyses of the paratexts bracketing women’s poetic anthologies, however, astonish us with just how even within this framework, the fathers, brothers, and husbands in late imperial China assisted their daughters, sisters, and wives to reach out beyond their boudoir for wider recognition and resonance.

Even more than texts, artifacts can now be read to let surface hitherto hidden negotiations for expanded social space. Indeed, textiles can be viewed as contested sites for self-expression, identification, even reconstruction of social rituals (Sheng 2009). Whereas on the one hand, women conformed to the confined body/space-politic, on the other hand, elite women also re-interpreted women’s virtuous work to carve out a space for their own survival and even gaining widespread fame for their artistry. It is no accident then that the elite women in the Southern Song, Ming and Qing times, as shown in the three articles, did not weave simple cloths as their forbears but rather, they made fine silk kesi pictures and exquisite embroideries. Nor were these elite ladies in late imperial China engaged in any utilitarian production for the state since their artistic and technological efforts resulted in pictorial likeness of flora, fauna, and figural representations that afforded viewing pleasure, spiritual meditation, even commercial enterprise.

In the case of Zhu Kerou in the Song dynasty (Tunstall’s essay), poverty greatly propelled her to seek technical innovation and move the refined silk kesi tapestry weaving from serving as a wrapper of paintings and sutras to an object worthy of appreciation on its own. Similarly, Han Ximeng of the late Ming dynasty started to embroider for her own interest and expression (I-Fen Huang’s essay). Again, the failing financial circumstances of her family found her talent expanded and exploited for commercial gain. In both instances, Zhu Kerou and Han Ximeng sacrificed their original, personal interest to improve their families’ welfare — in short, fulfilling filial piety, an esteemed Confucian virtue.


In the case of Buddhist hair embroidery (Yuhang Li’s essay), the woman painter Guan Daosheng in the Yuan dynasty might have aimed at likeness when she was said to have used hair to embroider the hair and eyebrows of bodhisattva Guanyin, certainly an innovation in technique. In later examples of hair-embroidery of Buddhist deities, was it not often the case that they were done to gain merit for their parents or families as well? This rationalization finds deep root in the early process of sinicising imported Buddhism where it was critical to reconcile on the one hand the need to abandon one’s family to join a Buddhist monastery and on the other hand, the Confucian family-oriented values, filial piety in particular.

Viewed in the broader context of a changing economy where the weaving of plain cloths lost meaning as virtuous work for elite women, some of them found ways to reinterpret women’s work. While regaining virtue, they also re-negotiated their social space. That their men folk aided them in this endeavor might be understood as their own strategies of re-establishing social order as well. Alexander Tunstall, I-Fen Huang, and Yuhang Li all show how elite women brokered the slow, fluid transition of women’s work, virtue and space with their path-breaking material expressions. This transition in part would explain why elite woman Ding Pei could name embroidery as the most special of women’s work in the nineteenth century. Another major force for the widespread practice of women embroidering was the evolved desire and perceived need to embroider for one’s trousseau. Here embroidery was also a contested site for projecting one’s wishes within a larger framework over which young girls rarely had control. How betrothal gift from the groom’s family led to the provision of dowry by the bride’s family (Ebrey 1993), alluded to earlier in this essay, requires further study.
Figures

Figure 1. Tabby, line drawing

TABBY
Fr. taffetas, toile
Ger. Leinwandbindung
It. tela
Port. pano
Sp. plana, tela
Sw. tuskaft, lärftsbinding

Figure 2. Zengzi’s mother interrupted at her loom, carving on stone early Han dynasty, print; excavated from Caozhuang, Sihong county, Jiangsu province.

SOURCE: Chen, Weiji (1984), Zhongguo fangzhi kexue jishushi, gudaibufen (Beijing, Kexue chubanshe), p. 199, Fig. III5-1-2.
Figure 3. Reconstruction of an early Western Zhou temple-palace structure; 11th to 10th century BCE, line drawing; excavated in 1976 at Fengchu 凤雏, Shaanxi province

SOURCE: Wu Hung (1995), Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press), p. 87, Fig. 2.7(b).
Figure 4. The Fields of Social Relations, line drawing: Zhaojiahe, Leijiawa township, Chengcheng county, Weinan district, Shaanxi province

Figure 5. The fields of social relations.

Figure 5. Aerial view of a typical courtyard house in Beijing, line drawing

SOURCE: Liu Dunzhen (ed.) (1980), Zhongguo gudai jianzhushi (Beijing, Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe), p. 316, Fig. 167-1.
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Angela Sheng: Woman’s Work, Virtue and Space


