Name_____ World History 10

Selections from "Beyond the Paradigm: Tea-Picking Women in Imperial China"

Weijing, Lu. "Beyond the Paradigm: Tea-Picking Women in Imperial China". *Journal of Women's History* (2004) 15(4): 19-46

In imperial China, "men plow and women weave" (nangeng nüzhi) stood as a canonical gender division of labor. Under this model, a man's work place was in the fields: he cultivated the land and tended the crops, growing food; a woman labored at home, where she sat at her spindle and loom, making cloth. The Confucian perception of women's work was also epitomized by the popular phrase nügong, or "womanly work," which ranged from spinning and weaving to sewing and embroidery…

Making cloth was, of course, not the only work women undertook, nor was it necessarily a year-round endeavor. Indeed, women in imperial times were engaged in a variety of economic tasks beyond the paradigm of "womanly work." The immense variations in geographical location and economic resources inevitably conditioned the ways in which women labored. Across the hilly areas of South China, women harvested tea…

Tea picking rarely entered the domain of official discourse on womanly virtue and women's economic roles, a major source through which historians have deciphered women's work in imperial China. In court edicts, statecraft discussions, and Confucian didactic texts, women's textile work was persistently promoted, although women's work in tea production was invisible. But tea picking was nevertheless deemed a feminine job and the silence in official discourse contrasted strikingly with the public interest revealed elsewhere. In imperial China, the public fascination with women tea pickers left behind ample records in local gazetteers and, especially, in poetry—the most popular literary genre engaged in by men of letters—allowing us to consider meanings of women's work from a different perspective...

Women tea pickers came to be noted for the first time in Tang poetry, during which the fashion of tea drinking rose. In his poem "Tea Mountain," Yuan Gao (727–786), the governor of Huzhou (home to the famous guzhu tea) described with deep sympathy how the imperial court's demand for "tribute tea" drove whole families of tea growers to the mountains. Indeed, the demand was so urgent that the women left for tea mountains at dawn in such a hurry that there was no time for combing hair. Other poems, however, portrayed tea-picking women with a more jubilant attitude. Male poets admired the gentle moves of the women's sleeves, their songs that "reverberate in the valley," and the women's "cloud-like coils" and their delicate "fragrant bamboo baskets." This stanza by Jiao Ran captures that fantasized representation of tea-picking women: "Carrying a basket, the girl of Wu climbs the mountain / In the mist, brambles pick at her clothes. / Falling mountain flowers confuse her direction / Startled birds fly away, as she crosses the stream. . . . "…

During the Tang, women worked not only for their own families, but also for tea plantations as hired labor. [However,] In contrast to later ages, tea picking during the Tang did not yet appear as a feminized activity. But in the succeeding Song poetry, tea picking men quietly vanished, yielding the ground to female protagonists and indicating women's increasing role in tea production in post–Tang times. In the Song, women worked hard in tea harvesting because of the state's heavy tea tax, according to Shu Yuexiang (1217–1301). Tea picking was a task that lay on the shoulders of women of all ages, married and unmarried…

Tea picking was certainly physically challenging, yet the environment in which women worked had its advantages. The physical restrictions prescribed by Confucian gender norms were relaxed in the tea hills. Working alongside other village women provided them with opportunities to develop friendships and mutual bonds. Temporarily freed from domestic chores and the strict supervision of their mothers-in-law, younger women walked to the mountains in groups, worked side by side, and complained about their tyrannical mothers-in-law. Such opportunity for socialization was denied women working at home. Not only did tea picking provide opportunities for socializing among women themselves; gender barriers seem to have receded to some extent in this particular social setting. At the peak of the tea harvesting season, it was not unusual for men and women to work together. During breaks, tea pickers chatted, laughed, and sang songs, and the presence of men and women apparently fueled the excitement. Poems and local gazetteers indicate that singing together during breaks was an ancient custom for many tea-growing regions. Tea-picking women, such as those in Taiwan, were said to be "all good at singing." But singing tea-songs was frequently a joint act by both men and women…

A cardinal principle of the Confucian gender system was the separation of the sexes. A proper line needed maintenance under all circumstances. The idea of "men plow and woman weave," while defining work responsibilities for men and women, underscored the importance of a spatial separation between the two. In the home, to which woman was relegated, she not only performed labor but also cultivated her female virtue. Tea picking ran counter to this fundamental principle, which cast tea picking women in a negative light, making them objects of skepticism. But there is something else. In terms of Confucian female virtue, some of the qualities attributed to tea-picking women were equally problematic. For example, in the Confucian tradition, respectable women did not sing (let alone with men)

Selections From: “Imagining Matriarchy: "Kingdoms of Women" in Tang China”

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Traditional Chinese sources designated certain self-contained societies as "kingdoms of women" either on the grounds that no men were present in the population or that women served as heads of state. This paper seeks to identify and discuss the kingdoms of women as known in Tang China under two categories: (1) mythical kingdoms constructed by legend and imagination, and (2) historical kingdoms, located in western Tibet, Japan, and Korea, which did, in fact, interact with Tang China. In the light of current views on matriarchy, only the Chinese characterization of the Tibetan kingdom before the eighth century might be understood as pointing to a true matriarchy, in terms of female rule, matrilineal succession, and matrilocal residence [living near matriarch]. Despite the nearly contemporary reigns of China's only female "emperor," Wu Zetian, Silla Korea's three ruling queens, and Yamato/Nara Japan's half-dozen empresses, none of these "kingdoms of women" can be understood as matriarchies, because women, in general, did not play a dominant role in the state or society…

In this essay matriarchy is defined as "that form of social organization in which descent is reckoned through the female line, where the mother is the head of the household and the children belong to the maternal clan." An additional condition defining a matriarchy is that power and authority be exercised by the women in decisions concerning community and foreign relations, social standards and values, including the sexual conduct of the men…

Much has been written about the unique position of Wu Zetian as the only ruling woman in Chinese history and the only woman to found a dynasty, the Zhou W (690-705). Nevertheless, after her death in 705, her daughter-in-law, Empress Wei, was unable to have her own daughter, Princess Anle, an emperor's daughter, appointed heir-apparent. When her husband died in 710, Empress Wei engineered a coup d'etat, hoping to rule after him. The plan backfired and she and her daughter Anle were executed. Their heads were hung in the market as a harsh memorial of their imperial ambitions. Wu Zetian's favorite daughter, Princess Taiping, succeeded no better in her attempt to follow her mother's footsteps; she committed suicide in 713 on the orders of her paternal nephew, Xuanzong (r. 712-56). Curiously, current scholarship has not pointed out that these powerful Tang women were approximately contemporary with other women rulers, such as Suiko, Gyoku/Saimei, Jito, and Chindok. Through tribute missions and envoys, Tang women were perhaps aware of some of these women rulers, who succeeded to the throne by virtue of their imperial blood. Princesses Taiping and Anle might have heard enviously of the Japanese and Korean princesses who legitimately became rulers. As princesses of the imperial line and daughters of emperors in an institutionalized patriarchy such as China, they did not get far in their bid for the positions of heir-apparent or emperor. Although women kept their father's surnames for the duration of their life, emperors' daughters and their offspring were constrained from

succession by China's patrilineal [authority through male ancenstors] descent system and patriarchal [male controlled] state…

Of the kingdoms of women we have examined here, only the putative Tibetan kingdom seems to have been, in that sense, a true matriarchy, but anthropologists certainly cannot report on a community that may have existed some thirteen centuries ago! Chinese writers mistook a woman ruler as indicative of a kingdom where women's power dominated over males, but Wu Zetian's own Zhou dynasty shows that in China the patriarchy remained unaffected. It seems ironic that matriarchies were imagined or fantasized by men living in patriarchies-not by women. This is certainly the case with the authors-exclusively male-who wrote the histories of, or imagined "kingdoms of women." Talented, educated women such as Ban Zhao of the Han dynasty and Song Ruoxin of the Tang were preoccupied with composing precepts for women that reinforced their submissive role in the Confucian patriarchy. Neither they, nor women of the Song or as late as the seventeenth century, were at all interested in imagining kingdoms of women within or beyond their world.

The Practice of Foot Binding Begun in the Song Dynasty

Foot binding (literally "bound feet" or "Lotus feet") is the custom of applying painfully tight binding to the feet of young girls to prevent further growth. The practice possibly originated among upperclass court dancers in the early Song dynasty, but spread and eventually became common among all but the lowest of classes. Eventually foot binding became very popular because men thought it to be highly attractive. Even today in China (Guangzhou), there are families with "lotus foot ancestry". In Guangzhou in the late 19th century, for example, it was usual to bind the feet of the eldest daughter of a lower-class family who was intended to be brought up as a lady. Her normal-footed sisters would grow up to be bond-servants or domestic slaves, and, when old enough, the concubines of rich men or the wives of laboring men - able to work in the fields alongside them. In contrast, the tiny narrow feet of the "ladies" were considered beautiful and made a woman's movements more feminine and dainty. It was assumed these eldest daughters would never need to work and was, according to some historians, a sign of status for husbands because they could demonstrate their ability to provide for such an "impractical" wife (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_binding). It eventually spread to some middle and even lower class families in which parents had dreams of upward mobility for their daughters.

The process was started before the arch of the foot had a chance to develop fully, usually between the ages of 2 and 5. Binding usually started during the winter months since the feet were more likely to be numb, and therefore the pain would not be as extreme.

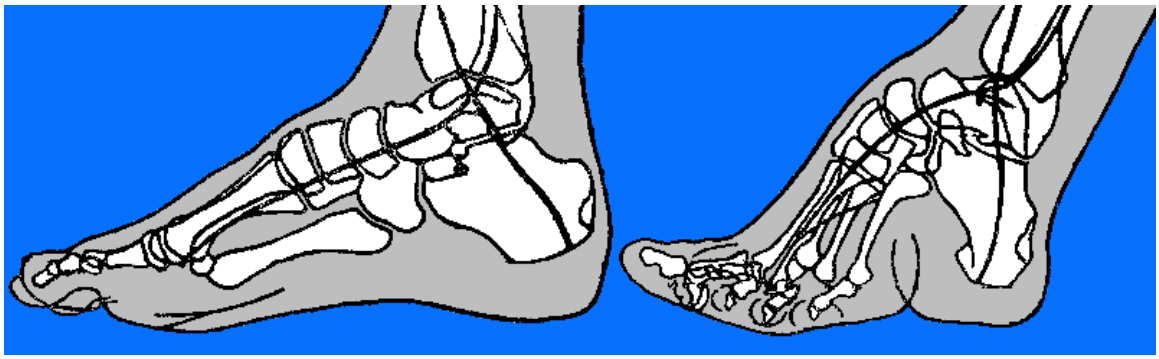
First, each foot would be soaked in a warm mixture of herbs and animal blood; this was intended to soften the foot and aid the binding. Then, the toenails were cut back as far as possible to prevent in-growth and subsequent infections, since the toes were to be pressed tightly into the sole of the foot. Cotton bandages, 3 m long and 5 cm wide (10 ft by 2 in), were prepared by soaking them in the blood and herb mixture. To enable the size of the feet to be reduced, the toes on each foot were curled under, then pressed with great force downwards and squeezed into the sole of the foot until the toes broke.

The broken toes were held tightly against the sole of the foot while the foot was then drawn down straight with the leg and the arch forcibly broken. The bandages were repeatedly wound in a figure-eight movement, starting at the inside of the foot at the instep, then carried over the toes, under the foot, and around the heel, the freshly broken toes being pressed tightly into the sole of the foot. At each pass around the foot, the binding cloth was tightened, pulling the ball of the foot and the heel together, causing the broken foot to fold at the arch, and pressing the toes underneath.

The girl's broken feet required a great deal of care and attention, and they would be unbound regularly. Each time the feet were unbound, they were washed, the toes carefully checked for injury, and the nails carefully and meticulously trimmed. When unbound, the broken feet were also kneaded to soften them and make the joints and

broken bones more flexible, and were soaked in a concoction that caused any necrotic (dead) flesh to fall off.

Immediately after this pedicure, the girl's broken toes were folded back under and the feet were rebound. The bindings were pulled ever tighter each time. This unbinding and rebinding ritual was repeated as often as possible (for the rich at least once daily, for poor peasants two or three times a week), with fresh bindings. It was generally an elder female member of the girl's family or a professional foot binder who carried out the initial breaking and ongoing binding of the feet. It was considered preferable to having the mother do it, as she might have been sympathetic to her daughter's pain and less willing to keep the bindings tight (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_binding).



Images from the Tang and Song Dynasties Depicting Women Playing Polo

Polo was introduced during the Tang dynasty and it was not uncommon for women to play the sport. Polo is physically challenging, dangerous, and occasionally violent so the participation of women was anathema to Confucian ideals. Does the fact that women participated anyway signal a slackening of misogynistic Confucian gender roles and growing freedom for women?

Other Powerful Roles for Women

There were many women in the Tang era who gained access to religious authority by taking vows as Daoist priestesses. The head mistresses of the bordellos in the North Hamlet of the capital Chang'an acquired large amounts of wealth and power. Their high-class courtesans, who likely influenced the Japanese geishas, were well respected. These courtesans were known as great singers and poets, supervised banquets and feasts, knew the rules to all the drinking games, and were trained to have the utmost respectable table manners.

Although they were renowned for their polite behavior, the courtesans were known to dominate the conversation amongst elite men, and were not afraid to openly castigate or criticize prominent male guests who talked too much or too loudly, boasted too much of their accomplishments, or had in some way ruined dinner for everyone by rude behavior (on one occasion a courtesan even beat up a drunken man who had insulted her). Men enjoyed the presence of assertive, active women (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tang_Dynasty#Tang_women).

Writing Assignment: Did the Tang and Song dynasties represent a era of increasing agency and social status for women considering the era of world history, or did they represent a misogynistic (male dominated) culture that contributed to the declining status of women in China?

Write at least one page (size 12 Times New Roman) in which you develop a coherent argument based on this question. Make sure you have a clear thesis and that you defend it using evidence from the documents, your textbook, and/or any other reliable sources that you wish to use.