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BEYOND THE PARADIGM

Tea-picking Women in Imperial China

Weijing Lu

This article explores the tension between women’s labor and tea-picking through the Confucian norm of “womanly work.” Using local gazetteer and poetry as major sources, it examines the economic roles and the lives of women tea-pickers over the course of China’s imperial history. It argues that women’s work in imperial China took on different meanings as ecological settings, economic resources, and social class shifted. The very commodity—tea—that these women produced also shaped portrayals of their labor, turning them into romantic objects and targets of gossip. But women tea-pickers also appeared as good women with moral dignity, suggesting the fundamental importance of industry and diligence as female virtues in imperial China.

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. Thus, men and women occupied distinctively different space; they were separate from yet complementary to one another, playing their designated roles in support of a self-sufficient household economy. At the same time, these norms defined social respectability: a good woman performed “womanly work” at home.

The economic behavior and the lives of Chinese women were shaped profoundly by these Confucian gender ideals. As demonstrated by recent studies in China’s long imperial history, women’s participation in production was primarily centered at home, particularly in textile manufacture and sericulture. In peasant households, women took up a range of tasks from processing raw materials to finishing cloth, including splicing raw ramie or hemp, tending silkworms, reeling silk, spinning yarn, and weaving cloth. Their economic contribution extended beyond their own household: cloth was a major item of taxation. Women, therefore, along with men, helped secure the government tax base. The work of making cloth was not only of economic significance. In the Qing (1644–1911) period, for example, state and local officials painstakingly promoted “womanly work” as a way not only to strengthen the economy but also to cultivate the female virtues of qin (industry) and jian (frugality).
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, yet we know very little of women’s economic contributions in such areas and social perceptions toward women who performed these labors. What did it mean to be a tea-picking woman? How was such a woman’s work depicted? How did she fit in to the Confucian discourse on women’s work? Raising these queries allows a more complete knowledge of the meanings of women’s work and of the lives of working women in imperial China.

That little research has been done on tea picking is due in part to the constraints imposed by source materials. 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.

The story of the tea-picking women was not a simple one, with its complexity rooted in part in the cultural perception of tea. In the context of Chinese literati tradition, tea was not merely a beverage or a commodity; it was a “celestial plant” that embodied scholarly nobility and refinement. Such literary perceptions of tea not only helped turn the rather mundane activity of tea picking into an aesthetic subject for poetry but also shaped popular imaginations of it. The imagery of the woman tea picker conveyed a range of often discordant symbols: she was at once a romantic object, symbol of social injustice, and embodiment of womanly virtue.

Piecing together poetic and gazetteer sources, I begin with an examination of tea-picking women’s economic contributions, showing how they played an increasingly important role in China’s tea industry over time with the commercialization of the economy. In detailing the ways they performed their daily duty, it demonstrates that women’s work in imperial China took on different meanings as ecological settings, economic resources, and social class shifted. The discussion then shifts to the various
opinions and views of tea-picking women and the source of this tension. I show that the very material, tea, that women worked with and the fashion with which they labored, that is, they were outside their homes in the public and often alongside men, all made women romantic objects and targets of public gossip. But, in literary discourse, women tea pickers emerged as good women with moral dignity, affirming the fundamental importance of industry and endurance as female virtues. The appreciation of the social elite toward women tea pickers confirms how economic circumstances mediated the rigid Confucian gender code that emphasized the separation of men and women in the workplace.

Tea Production in Chinese History

China enjoys the longest history of tea cultivation and consumption in the world. As early as the first century CE, tea was already commonly consumed in regions such as today’s Sichuan province, and the custom of tea drinking gradually extended to South China. By the Tang period, the great age of Chinese Buddhism, tea drinking enjoyed empire-wide popularity among the upper class. For the first time in history, the imperial court established a policy called the “tribute of tea,” demanding the best quality tea be delivered to the capital for the emperor and palace ladies to enjoy.

The popularization of tea consumption seems purely accidental, but its impact was long lasting. According to the Tang record, the habit of tea drinking spread widely when Chan monks used tea to keep themselves awake during their long hours of meditation. Once the fashion was set in motion, it was quickly charged with a spiritual flavor embraced by the literati class. For example, poet Lu Tong (775–835) pronounced that seven bowls of tea could create transcendental power that carries one into the realm of the immortals. This “celestial plant” was a precious gift in elite circles, and the harvesting of tea marked an occasion for celebration, in which poet-officials held “tea parties” in the mountains and courtesans were invited to accompany them on tours of the mountains. Lu Yu (733–804?) perhaps best expressed China’s long tradition of tea connoisseurship in The Classic of Tea. In a ritualistic way, it delineated nearly every aspect of tea production and consumption, including tea planting, manufacturing, and the selection of water for making tea. Such passion about tea never flagged, which explains partly why tea-picking remained a perennial subject matter in Chinese poetry.

Such euphoria about tea would have stimulated tea production. But in the Tang period, the scale of both the tea industry and consumption was still limited. Tea was either grown wild or planted at monasteries or
in family gardens. In the succeeding Song era (960–1279), the age of “first economic revolution,” tea grew into an important cash crop for peasant households. With the flourishing commercial economy and development of urban centers, the Song period saw a rapid increase in tea houses spreading through towns and cities. At the same time, tea made its way into ordinary households, becoming one of the seven basic items for daily life, alongside firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar. While domestic markets expanded, the international tea trade also grew. Tea was a major item in the Song dynasty’s trade with inner Asia. The “tea-horse” trade, which began in the Tang, assumed new significance in the Song economy and foreign relations.

The momentum that the tea industry gained never dwindled, and a great era of tea was soon to come. Several factors appear to have contributed to the coming of the golden era of tea production in late imperial era, namely the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing. The Chinese population expanded steadily during this period, which brought both the market demands for tea and the tea production to a new level. As waves of migration brought people to peripheral areas, hills where no grain crops could grow were increasingly opened up for tea cultivation. Yang Yiqing (1454–1530) wrote in his memorial to the court that since the reign of Chenghua (1465–1487) people from many provinces fled to the mountains and new tea plantations increased numerously. Some tea plantations became so large that it took a traveler several weeks to across them. Local accounts indicate the same trend of growth, and this observation is confirmed also by Robert Gardella’s recent study. He points out that in Jianyang, much of the mountain land, called “wasteland”, was turned to tea plantation by the early nineteenth century. At the same time, the expanding local and regional systems helped to bring tea into towns and cities rapidly, which in turn stimulated the tea economy. By 1840, tea was ranked sixth in the domestic market in terms of the total volume of trade, after grain, cotton, cotton cloth, silk, and silk fabric.

The rising demands for tea in the world market since the sixteenth century also injected energy into this old industry. As we know, the European interest in tea evolved in the context of the maritime expansion in Asia and the “discovery” of the mysterious “Orient.” Tea was brought to the English court with the aroma of exoticism, and it quickly came to be associated with the high culture of the aristocrats before taking on the symbol of the leisured lifestyle of the middle class. By 1718, in the market of global trade, tea outranked silk and silk fabric to become the number one export commodity of the East India Company. During the nineteenth century, with the exception of the last two decades, China was the dominant source of tea for the rest of the world.
Women and Tea Production

Early histories left little evidence of women’s contributions to tea production. 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.23 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,”24 and the women’s “cloud-like coils” and their delicate “fragrant bamboo baskets.”25 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. . . . ” 26

During the Tang, women worked not only for their own families, but also for tea plantations as hired labor. Du Guangting (850–933), for example, reported that the owner of a tea plantation (cha yuan) in Mount Xianjun each year employed women and men to pick tea.27 Among the upper class, tea picking was a pastime rather than work.28 In contrast to later ages, tea picking during the Tang did not yet appear as a feminized activity. Tea-picking male literati became characters in poetry, with their act as an example of noble taste or spiritual transcendence. This reflected the era’s fascination with tea.29 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).30 Tea picking was a task that lay on the shoulders of women of all ages, married and unmarried. Fan Chengda (1126–1193) depicted a scene he witnessed in the mountainous Kuizhou, Sichuan:

White-haired old ladies wear red flowers /
Young girls dress their hair in three coils. /
Carrying sleepy babies on their backs, they mount the hills /
The season for picking mulberry leaves is over, and it’s /
Time for picking tea.31

This unadorned lyric suggests that, in addition to tea, sericulture was another family business in the area and that women played an important
role in both industries. These condensed lines reveal the heavy labor these women have been performing. There was little time for rest, indeed. When tea harvesting season began, even women with little babies could not afford to stay home. Another Song writer, Mei Yaochen (1002–1060), wrote that at such times of urgency, the conflict between a woman’s conventional duties—namely silkworm breeding and weaving—and tea harvesting was unavoidable, but tea picking was treated as the top priority. Conflicts in duty must have faced tea-picking women of all periods.

During the Ming and Qing, as tea production escalated, the use of female labor for tea harvesting reached a new height, demonstrated through both poetic evidence and local accounts. The majority of existing poems about tea picking women came from these periods. Local gazetteers, which proliferated during the same time, complement the poetic portrayal of tea-picking, showing widespread female labor in tea growing areas across South China. Purported to project a good image of an orderly rustic community, gazetteer accounts are typically brief: “When the season of guyu begins, men, women, and children, carrying tea baskets, spread all over the valley.”

Although short, the prevalence of similar reports from all levels of local history—town, county, and prefectural gazetteers—powerfully suggest the unprecedented degree of women’s involvement in tea harvesting. The demands for tea could only be met by maximum use of labor in all tea growing regions. Clearly, as demand for tea grew and tea became a major source of income for peasant households, women from the highlands were now toiling on the hillsides.

Poems from the late imperial period, such as this one by Gao Qi (1336–1374), continued to project a romanticized image of the tea picking woman:

The rain has passed over creeks and mountains, and the blue clouds are mild;  
In the thick shadows tea leaves are half-sprouted, and shoots are still short.  
The girls in silver hairpins sing back and forth;  
Looking at each other’s baskets, they ask: “Who has picked the most?  
The fragrance of the tea leaves is still on their hands when they return;  
The highest grade tea will be first presented to the governor.  
Just cured in the bamboo brazier, the tea is so fresh—but they do not taste it;  
Packed into baskets, it will be sold to the Hunan merchants.

The poem is not only aesthetically enchanting. It also delivers socio-economic messages: the much-resented “tribute of tea,” or some varia-
tion, seems to have been still in practice, but as a commercial crop, tea had already brought ordinary peasant households into a larger network of trade in which women were a major economic force.36

It is important to note that the common use of female labor in the late imperial period not only changed the landscape of agriculture but also added new meaning to women’s work. The feminization of the work of tea picking was complete. Although tea picking was often joined by men, late imperial cultural perception associated tea picking most closely with women, not men. The term \textit{caichanü} (tea-picking girl) emerged by this time as a special category of working women,37 and the famous late Ming drama \textit{Peony Pavilion} vividly suggested this perception. Prefect Du Bao, the father of the protagonist Du Liniang, decided to take a tour to promote agriculture in his jurisdiction. During the trip, he was pleased to see, through four symbolic scenes—a peasant man plowing the land, a boy herding buffaloes, women gathering mulberry leaves, and women picking tea—that his people were leading industrious and happy lives.38

Sources are still insufficient for us to discuss women tea pickers’ economic contribution in tangible terms, but we can surmise that they were able to bring in substantial family income. Since tea typically grew in hilly areas where arable lands were inadequate, peasants counted on tea as their stable economic resource. According to Yoshinobu Shiba’s study of commercial development in Qimen county, as early as the Song “almost seven-tenths of the 5400 households in the county drew their livelihood from tea manufacture and business connected with it.”39 Qu Dajun (1630–1696) noted that in the area south of the Pearl River in Guangdong, “people commonly grew tea. . . . One \textit{mu} of tea and two trees of \textit{kudeng} will support two people for a year.”40 In eighteenth-century Huzhou, which is in the lower Yangzi region, the number of tea plants was said to be a sign of the wealth of villagers.41 In such areas, the productive role of women as tea pickers can hardly be overestimated.42 It is not clear, however, how much women themselves benefited directly from their work. Zhang Hong, a Qing writer, reports that in Puer, Yunnan, women harvested, processed, and sold “girl tea” (\textit{nüercha}) in order to earn cash for dowries.43

Tea cultivation in imperial China was largely a family enterprise operated by the so-called \textit{chahu} (tea household), \textit{yuanhu} (plantation household), or \textit{shanhu} (mountain household). Most tea households were of small or moderate size and used only family labor. Women worked within the structure of the household economy and played a crucial part in upholding their households.44 From the seventeenth century on, as market demand for tea grew rapidly, merchants moved persistently into tea growing areas. They set up a \textit{chazhuang} (tea firm), which rented hilly slopes to grow tea or collected raw or roughly cured tea leaves from local peasant house-
holds and then manufactured and distributed tea to cities to be sold or shipped them abroad. Unlike peasant tea households, tea firms hired seasonal workers, men and women. Women picked tea or sorted leaves. According to the report of Chûgoku-shôbetsu senshi (comprehensive records of Chinese provinces), in the early twentieth century, a moderate-sized firm typically hired forty to fifty women, and bigger firms employed several hundred or even thousands of women. As tea firms rushed in, the thriving business attracted men and women who looked for opportunities to earn a wage. In Tunxi, Anhui, at the peak tea harvesting season, boats carrying male and female migrant workers arrived everyday by the hundreds.

Women tea pickers were among the earliest groups of female migrants in traditional China who ventured out of their homes to take advantage of economic opportunities elsewhere. Many of them migrated across county; some crossed the province. For example, more than half of the male and female employees working in the tea-firms in Yangloudong in Hubei province were from Jiangxi, located to its south. Jiangxi women supplied labor for Fujian province. Seasonal migration across county was also common. A Xinchang county gazetteer points out that many women tea-pickers were from the adjacent Tiantai county.

**Tea Picking: Women’s Work beyond the Confucian Paradigm**

Why did women come to play a dominant role in tea production? A critical factor has to do with the nature of the tea plant. Tea is seasonal and extremely sensitive to climate. It requires intense labor at the moment of harvesting—even one day’s premature picking or delay can affect its quality. In some areas, tea plants yield three or four pickings—in spring, summer, and autumn—but the most productive season always begins in mid-spring and lasts until early summer. Since tea was not the sole crop on which peasant households depended for their livelihood in many regions, and spring was the season for working with other crops—transplanting seedlings or plucking mulberry leaves, for example—peasants had to allocate labor with maximum efficiency to get all the work done. While men mainly dealt with the labors that required more physical strength, women were relegated to tea harvesting.

Compared to making cloth, tea picking was not only tedious but also physically more demanding and even dangerous. Tea picking involved long working hours. According to the classics on tea connoisseurship, the ideal time for picking tea leaves was early morning before sunrise, but such advice was unpractical for peasants. During late Ming and Qing times, tea-pickers left home for the tea hills before dawn and returned in the
evening, taking lunch with them to save the time of a trip home to eat.\textsuperscript{53} In the Hengshan area, tea-pickers carried with them small one-legged stools so that they could sit down while working.\textsuperscript{54} The output per day, per worker varied with the individual, depending on speed and skill. Reports from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are not uniform, ranging from ten \textit{jin} to thirty \textit{jin} per day.\textsuperscript{55} We can imagine the physical challenge women faced: At the end of the day, already exhausted, they had to walk home carrying the heavy baskets filled with tea leaves.

Women tea pickers were set apart from their sisters in making cloth in yet another respect: they worked outdoors in the hills, where there was no place for them to shelter from sun, wind, or rain. The tea classics hold that rain is most devastating for tea of good quality. But in actual practice, this rule was largely disregarded. Both Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692), the great thinker, and Li Yiqing, a mid-nineteenth-century Guangdong poet, described how the tea-pickers became even more high-spirited in the rain or took the sudden rain with good humor.\textsuperscript{56} However, laughing was not likely to happen in a real situation like this!

Bad weather aside, the mountain itself could also be a formidable threat to the tea-pickers. Among their persistent natural enemies were insects and snakes.\textsuperscript{57} Because tea tended to grow on damp, shadowy hillsides, the environment was ideal for such creatures. Steep hills and mountain slopes posed other obstacles to tea-pickers. Robert Fortune, the Briton who traveled across the tea growing areas during the mid-nineteenth century, observed that in the Wuyi Mountain region, “the tea-shrub is cultivated everywhere, and often in the most inaccessible situations, such as on the summits and ledges of precipitous rocks.”\textsuperscript{58} Although strong and nimble bodied men—nicknamed “mountain monkeys”—would be sent to gather tea leaves in dangerous locations, and even real monkeys were said to have been made to do the work,\textsuperscript{59} women were not exempt from such a task. The 1813 gazetteer of Mianzhu County, Sichuan, reports that in the area where tea grew between steep cliffs and torrential rivers, women as well as men climbed the mountains “like monkeys” to pick tea.\textsuperscript{60} Under these conditions, a tea picker falling from a cliff was only to be expected.\textsuperscript{61}

For a woman teapicker, returning home after an exhausting day in the mountains did not end her labors. Another task awaited her that would take up most of her evening: sorting out tea leaves from stalks. Since fresh leaves rotted easily, they had to be roughly cured immediately after being picked. In a poem, Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) delineated a scene in which the whole family, including boys and girls, sit around a lamp sorting out tea leaves late into the night.\textsuperscript{62} Imagine this: when she goes to bed, it is only a few hours before from dawn, when she has to get up again to leave for the mountain.
What further added to this already relentless routine was that tea picking women were expected not only to work on rugged mountainsides, but also to perform other conventional female duties. When both women and men picked tea, it was the woman’s responsibility to get up early to prepare breakfast or food to be carried to the work sites.\textsuperscript{63} It was also the woman’s job to look after children—mothers often took along their children when going to the tea mountains, where older children would help with the picking under their mothers’ watchful eyes.\textsuperscript{64}

When the tea season came to an end, spinning and weaving, embroidering, and mulberry leaf picking occupied much of the women’s time. A widely circulated late-nineteenth-century folk song describes the seasonal work a young woman performed: in the second month, she picked tea; in the third month, she did embroidering; in the fourth month, she cared for silkworms and picked tea; in the eighth month, she stayed home weaving cloth and sewing clothes.\textsuperscript{65} The song, of course, might not be accurate in every respect, but it does name many other jobs of a woman tea picker. Gazetteers provide similar accounts. For example, in Linxiang county, Hunan, growing tea and cloth-making were two basic industries of the poor “mountain people.”\textsuperscript{66} In the Luxi area of the same province, women from poor families kept themselves occupied with “tea picking, cooking and delivering food for their husbands (who worked in the fields,) and growing vegetables in gardens.” The author commented with satisfaction: “The people here are customarily industrious and frugal!”\textsuperscript{67}

The conclusion of recent studies—that women with bound feet did participate in physical labor in the countryside—seemingly applies to the work of tea picking.\textsuperscript{68} Two local poets from the nineteenth-century Zhejiang and Guangdong, for example, portrayed the graceful steps of women walking to tea plantations with terms such as \textit{gongxie} (bow-shaped shoes), \textit{jinlian} (golden lotus), and \textit{lianbu} (lotus steps)—all of which are conventional expressions describing bound feet.\textsuperscript{69} These terms, of course, might be only rhetorical. But we probably need not be too skeptical.\textsuperscript{70}

Scholars have also contemplated the relationship between women’s work and the belief in female pollution. In some areas of sericulture, anthropologists report, women during menstruation were prohibited from approaching silkworms. In rural Guangdong, married women were forbidden from performing certain tasks in the breeding of silkworms because of their association with pregnancy and childbearing. Their “unclean” bodies would bring harm to silkworm, the local people believed.\textsuperscript{71} Both connoisseurship texts and local reports seem to suggest that tea picking was not immune from the influence of similar views. The \textit{Chajie (Explanation of Tea)} by Luo Lin from the Ming stresses that women who are menstruating should be excluded from tea picking or tea making.\textsuperscript{72} According
to Chûgoku-shôbetsu senshi, in the famous “dragon’s well” tea producing areas, “the first and second pickings were exclusively done by virgin girls whose ages range from about ten to fifteen or sixteen.” A quotation from the Classic of Tea, cited by two Qing gazetteers, goes a step further to even exclude all women from tea picking: “As for picking tea, it must be done by people of noble deeds and virtue. Women, chickens, and dogs should not be allowed in the [tea] mountains. The tea will have a pure quality only if processed in this way.”

The misogynistic tone of this text is apparent. For this male author, no distinction needed to be drawn between women and chickens and dogs. They were all creatures incapable of “noble deeds and virtue,” and therefore, should hold no place in the making of tea. However, the impact of such notions probably existed only to a limited extent. The fact remains that few Chinese sources took note of such prohibition. Moreover, given the fact that women supplied most of the labor in tea harvesting, and that tea picking was so labor-intensive, it is doubtful that such a notion would have a significant impact on the actual practice of peasants.

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. For example, in Houshan, Anhei, the 1776 county gazetteer reports, “men and women mingle together, and songs fill the valleys.” Taking great pride in the spectacle of tea-song singing, some localities even honored such scenes as one of their “most wonderful views.” The noisy and delightful scene is still vividly recognizable in this report from the early twentieth century: “At two or three o’clock in the afternoon during tea picking season, colorfully dressed men
and women were all over the mountain. . . . When working, they did not often speak; whenever they had a little leisure, the mountain was full of their noise and the folk songs that they sang back and forth. This was truly a great event in the countryside.81

Viewers might find such a vibrant scene fascinating, but moralists would have judged interaction between sexes inappropriate in terms of Confucian gender norms. Indeed, tea picking, a type of work that placed women in such an environment, was far removed from the principles underlying the ideal gender division of labor. How did the contemporaries talk about women tea pickers? What was the contemporary perception of women’s work in tea picking and women tea pickers?

Perceptions of Women Tea Pickers

Both literati poetry and popular entertainment projected a romanticized image of the tea-picking woman far distanced from reality: unpleasant elements in the actual work—the tediousness, the danger, and arduousness of the labor—were filtered, whereas feminine gracefulness and rustic charm became the foci. To this romanticization was sometimes added subtle suggestions of sensuality, thus turning the woman tea picker into an object of social suspicion. There is a concurrent theme in tea-picking poetry: the appreciation of the work of tea pickers and the sympathy for their hardships. This parallels the motif of romanticization, giving a layer of moral meaning to the imagery.

The late imperial romanticization of tea pickers closely connected to rural entertainment. According to some studies, by the Ming period, local festivals already included in the repertoire of performances a “tea-picking dance” (caichawu) or “tea-picking opera” (caichaxi or caichadeng). These performances featured men and women, who dressed up as tea pickers and sang back and forth. “Tea-picking songs” (caichage) had also gained popularity by this time.82 Many of these were love songs exchanged between men and women,83 and as such, although popular among the villagers, often deemed by Confucian moralists as “vulgar.”84

In poetic representation, romance was inborn to the imagery of tea-picking women. Poets of all the ages took pleasure in depicting tea-picking girls’ neat hairdo, “delicate fingers,” “white wrists,” and their beautiful songs; the tea-picking women were often portrayed as wearing wild flowers.85 The lines between romanticization and sensuality were occasionally blurred. The nineteenth-century Jiang Tan, for example, loaded his “Tea-picking Song” with sensual tropes and allusions: tea-picking girls are compared with jade; their skin with “congealed fat;”86 their appearance with rosy morning clouds; their arms with jade lotus roots; and their
fragrance with tea. Some poets would let their imagination go so far as to describe the beautiful breast of the tea-picking girl:

Rarely was this tea known to people since ancient times,
Its superb quality has nothing to do with curing by fire.
When the girl, who is only fifteen years old, arrives to pick tea,
Her smooth breast (su xiong) heats the leaves, which look like jade.
She dries the tea with no concern for her clothing,
The tea foams into the cup—a cupful of fragrance.

The poem refers to a seventeenth-century story about “scared-to-death-fragrant tea” (xiasiren xiang, later known as biluochun). It is said that tea pickers happened to put tea leaves in their bosoms when baskets were full. Their body heat warming up the leaves, released an extraordinarily fragrant smell, hence the discovery of “scared-to-death-fragrant tea.” In the lyric, the poet puns upon the phrase ruhua, “floating tea foam,” to suggest that what makes biluochu marvelous is that it embodies the fragrance of the girl’s bosom.

Some Qing writers considered the spring tea mountain a sexually alluring site. Thus, the mingling of women and men was troublesome, as suggested by this anecdote:

Yining is a prefecture producing tea. Every year in the second lunar month, when the tea plants sprout, the people of Yining strive to be the first to pick tea for fear that the leaves might grow too big to make good tea. Tea mountains belong to different owners, who hire people to pick tea. Carrying big baskets on their backs, women from the nearby villages would put on their make-up, wear narrow-sleeved red shirts, which cover only half of their arms, and green shorts with aprons round their waists, and go barefoot to the tea mountains. They were said to gather the leftover tea leaves. They would not come back until dusk. By then their big baskets were already filled with tea leaves, and their hair and makeup were disheveled. Nobody in their family would ask them where they got their tea leaves. Although they said nothing, they knew what was going on in the tea mountains. Isn’t it quite comical!

Despite the humorous tone of the narrative, the tea mountains appeared as a deregulated place threatening public morality. Such implicit criticism rose to a high pitch after the tea planters began to hire female tea workers for picking and selecting. Considering it a good thing because it “creates extra income for women from poor households,” officials felt uncomfortable with a gender-mixed work setting. The magistrate of Anhua county,
Hunan, for example, issued a rule separating the sexes when women and men did tea sorting so that they would not mingle and flirt with each other. The newly published pictorial *Dianshizhai huabao* in the 1880s satirized a scandal of supposed sexual misconduct of young women working in a Jiangxi tea firm.

But poets had not always regarded the association between sexes suspiciously. Hu Jie, a seventeenth-century writer, describes in a delightful tone a scene of a young girl and a young man returning home at nightfall after spending a day together picking tea. Tea-picking girls, after all, were not degraded. Even more remarkably, the romanticization of women tea pickers interwove with recognition of their diligence and hard work. With appreciation and pride, poets depicted pickers from their native areas as energetic workers who enjoyed laboring and knew their responsibility. In 1659, Wang Fuzhi composed a series of ten poems describing various scenes of tea picking. “Moist clouds conceal the myriad linked peaks / Amid the clouds I hear their laughing and merry chatting. / It looks just like a misty moonlit night on Lake Dongting / The Lake’s waters are dotted with fishing boats.”

Wang was apparently captured by the cheerful atmosphere of the tea mountains his hometown village in Hengshan, Hunan, where folk were busy working. Like Wang Fuzhi, Li Yiqing, a native of Haiyang, Guangdong, authored a series of verses containing thirty stanzas titled “chunyuan caichaci” (“Picking Tea in the Spring Plantations”). Li was a male poet, but in his series, the first-person protagonist is a young woman. Her husband is away, and she has a little sister-in-law with whom she works most of the time:

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Today the West Mountain is clearly blue /
Carrying my basket I wait for my friends at the village stile. /
My little sister-in-law was tenderly raised /
Leaning on the rail, she is fast asleep—even my call cannot wake her up.
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With the poet’s appreciation and sympathy flowing between them, these lines present moving details of tea pickers’ daily routines. Their diligence is once again the central theme of work by a poet from Anhui:

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In Qingming season, the “magic plant” sprouts all over the valley /
Its quality will not be as good, when summer comes /
How many are “visiting-home” (guining) daughters? /
In red dresses, they come out with their mothers to pick tea.
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The image of the “visiting-home” daughters powerfully hints at the busyness of the season and the diligence of women in this village: if even married daughters visiting their natal families joined their mothers to pick tea.
tea, was there anyone who did not? The following Qing poem by Cao Weijie from Zhejiang takes a different angle in presenting the tea pickers, yet a similar appreciation permeates the scene: “Above the poplar trees, white clouds are thick / In the guyu season, the sprouting tea shoots are as thin as needles. / Singing folksongs, village women with lotus feet walk steadily / Carrying baskets on their backs, they climb the highest peak.”

Here, the juxtaposition of “lotus feet” and “the highest peak” indicates the strength of these women; singing while climbing suggests their delight and high spirits.

Poets frequently deployed this appreciation to criticize social injustice and the exploitation of tea peasants. Writers such as Chen Zhang of the seventeenth century protested the harsh “tea tribute” policy and expressed his deep sympathy toward the tea-picking girls, who labored industriously despite lives marked by misery. Behind the sighs of these girls he saw the suffering of both their families and other tea growers:

The Fenghuang Peak is sweetened with spring dew,  
The girls in blue skirts have nimble fingers.  
Passing over streams and crossing clouds, they go to pick tea,  
At noon they return home with baskets that are half-empty.  
The express edict for “tea tribute” has come down from the capital, 
Even though cold weather has delayed the sprouting of tea.  
After curing, grains of tea appear like the seeds of lotus,  
Who understands? More bitter than lotus seeds are their hearts.

Confucian-minded poets presented the hardships of the peasants through tea picking because it epitomized the tedious process of tea making. Since each individual tea leaf had to go through a tea-picker’s hands, the time-consuming and tiresome nature of the work is obvious. Poets such as Chen Zhang lamented that, although tea peasants worked day and night, they did not even get to taste the tea, and those who enjoyed tea had no sense of appreciation for the hard work of the tea peasants.

Representations of the woman tea picker thus reflects a range of sometimes conflicting contemporary views, in which romanticization, appreciation, and sympathy blended with an ambiguous suspicion. Confucian gender values generated much of this tension. Unlike spinning or weaving, tea picking was not in accordance with the Confucian tradition—ideas underlying the model of gender division of labor spelled out in the notion “men plow and women weave” and through the concept of “womanly work.” At the same time, the appreciation and sympathy of the literati highlights the complexity in the definition of respectability in women’s work: although tea picking lay beyond the moral category of “womanly work,” it could still garner a legitimate place in Confucian society.
Womanly Virtue and Tea-Picking 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). Even their garrulous good cheer was not in keeping with the womanly virtues espoused in the didactic classics. In the work Nü Jie (Instructions for Women), Ban Zhao stressed twice that a woman “should be quiet and self-restrained and not fond of playing and laughing.”

Ming-Qing moralist writings upheld Ban’s view. Tang Biao, the author of an early Qing didactic text, for example, declared, “Whether a woman is virtuous or not can be best testified from the pitch of her voice and the amount she speaks. Those who speak in a lower voice and speak little are virtuous, and those who speak in a high voice and are talkative are not virtuous.”

Such writers regarded speaking aloud and laughing at will as improper modes of behavior for a woman, and singing was the calling of the courtesan.

No wonder the work of tea picking was excluded from so-called womanly work. What is striking here, however, is perhaps not that tea-picking women failed to uphold Confucian standards for appropriate womanly behavior, but rather that literati disregarded these standards, as demonstrated in the male poets’ unflagging interest in tea picking as a poetic subject and their sympathetic and appreciative tones. How can we explain this?

Socioeconomic class helps explain this juncture. Although the Confucian norms regarding womanly virtue apply to all women regardless of their social status, among the poor and economically disadvantaged, industry and hard work were fundamental criteria for a good woman. When enumerating the professions of women in its county, the gazetteer of Luxi county, Hunan, remarked:

The land of Luxi grows few mulberry trees, and women are not engaged in rearing silkworms. Instead, they spin and weave, making cotton and ramie cloth. Besides, they make shoes or do embroidery. As for women from the poor families, they pick tea,
deliver food to the fields (where their men work), and plant vegetables in the gardens. Therefore, people here are customarily diligent, not idle and lascivious.105

According to the editor of this gazetteer, how women labored largely depended on their families’ economic status. Whereas those from better-off families were not engaged in outside jobs, those from poor families had to be so. Even the eighteenth century moralist writer Shi Dian admitted that the duties of women from poor families included not only spinning, weaving, cooking, drawing water from wells, waiting upon mothers-in-law, and rearing children, but also working in the fields.106 Gender boundaries were negotiable, if not entirely negligible, in these circumstances. Likewise, diligence became the most praiseworthy feminine attribute in tea-picking poetry, while some other “virtues” were conveniently ignored.

This flexible attitude toward women’s work might also reflect the literati’s recognition of spatial disparities between the core and peripheral areas. In peripheral areas where tea was one of the major crops that peasants relied on for a living, keeping women home in the busy season of tea harvesting, although in accordance with Confucian ideals, might not have been a practical choice in the household economy. In such conditions, it appears, practicality could justify a departure from the normative gender boundaries.

This labor pattern offers a suggestive contrast with women’s work in the coastal Ningbo area during the early twentieth century. Historian Susan Mann points out that the importance of women’s work in the household economy increased in the coastal area as a result of the growth of foreign trade and early industrialization.107 However, due to a local taboo—working outside home was a mark of low status—Ningbo women preferred to stay home and produce handicrafts for the expanding commercial market rather than work elsewhere or in the fields. Only women from poor households and less urbanized counties were likely to take jobs outside the home.108 It appears that some inland areas did not have strong taboos prohibiting women from going out to work. The influence of Confucian gender values was stronger on the coast than in the mountains.109

On yet another level, characteristics given to tea—purity and nobility—might have shaped the portrayals of tea-picking women. While the tradition of Chinese connoisseurship of tea served as an undercurrent stimulating poets to write about “tea-picking girls,” symbols of tea continued to acquire new cultural meanings. In the popular discourse of the late imperial period, tea came to represent not only the noble characters of the male elite but also the Confucian virtue of female chastity. The ritual of a girl’s engagement was called “drinking tea,” and a popular proverb explained that “a good woman will not drink tea from two families.”
Such cultural views about tea could have played a subtle role in negotiating an overall dignified place for women tea-pickers in the literary discourse. If we consider more broadly the relationship between the literary presentation of women’s work, a subtle link apparently developed between the material with which women labored and their treatment. Tea picking was not the only type of women’s work that appealed to the literati. Embroidering, plucking mulberry leaves, weaving (silk cloth), gathering lotus, and picking water chestnuts all made their way into poetry. These feminine activities, often portrayed in a similarly romantic and appreciative light, have one thing in common: they produced luxury commodities or materials that identified the lifestyle of the refined elite. Tea and mulberry-leaf picking produced tea and silk, while the lotus symbolized purity and nobility. In contrast, cotton picking, which resulted in cloth for the lower classes, never stirred the same interest or imagination of poets.

Conclusion

Tea picking, which women conventionally performed for more than a thousand years, is barely traceable in official writings, primarily because it does not fit the ideal gender division of labor. As Patricia Ebrey points out in reference to tea picking, “in the imagination of Chinese scholars women’s work largely lay elsewhere,” that is, in making cloth. Confucian gender ideology rejected working outdoors in gender-mixed circumstances.

But the long history of women’s labor in this sector of the imperial economy confirms a variety of duties and work options for women other than those in textile production. In mountainous South China, women made up the majority of the tea-picking workforce, while concurrently performing a wide range of work within and outside their homes. The fashion with which tea pickers engaged in work differed markedly compared with those who performed the conventional duties of “womanly work.” Clearly, the meanings of women’s work were much more complex than the model of “men plow and women weave” suggests.

The ambivalence or contradiction in public perceptions of women tea pickers, however, illustrates both the power of Confucian gender ideals and a more flexible side to literati’s attitude toward women’s labor. Working in public, often together with men, made women tea pickers the target of satire and suspicion. However, the focus of literati poetry on their economic contributions and their strength and diligence suggested that late imperial society also valued industry and endurance. In doing so, the poets have also left historians a legacy acknowledging how class,
economic status, and geographical differences shape women’s work behavior.

NOTES

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1Following Francesca Bray’s inspiring discussion about the distinction between the usage of “women’s work” and “womanly work,” in this paper I use both terms, depending on the context and emphasis. Bray explains that the Chinese term *nügong* is translated as “womanly work” when used by the “moralists and officials,” who saw female work as “a moral activity linked to a gendered identity and embodied in weaving.” When translated as “women’s work,” “*nügong* could mean any kind of work women performed that produced recognizable commodities.” Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 256. The distinction is useful in helping us to think about gender implications in the term. However, *nügong* in traditional texts only referred to certain types of work performed by women, namely, spinning and weaving, making clothes, and embroidering, all work having something to do, as Susan Mann points out, with the “needle, spindle, and loom.” Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 166.


5Biographies of exemplary women produced throughout imperial history, illustrated the virtue of the protagonists through their diligent labor with looms and spindles; the Qing collection *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* [Collected Essays on Statecraft of Our August Dynasty], advocated spinning, weaving, and sewing, but failed to mention women’s work in tea production. He Changling, ed., *Huangchao jingshi wenbian*. (1826; reprint, Taibei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1972), 1293–1355.
Unlike in the Western tradition, where, as Stephen Owen puts it, “lyric poetry had always been a peculiar and singular occupation, uneasily honored by a few and largely ignored by most,” writing poetry was a universal activity for the Chinese literati. Poetry in classical literature serves as a form of expressing emotions, ideas, social criticism as well as recording daily activities. Paul S. Ropp, ed., *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 294.


9*Quan Tang shi* [Complete poetry of the Tang] (1706; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chuban she, 1986], 970.


11Famed poets of the era such as Liu Yuxi (772–842), Bo Juyi (772–846), and Du Mu (803–853) all left behind poems about tea party. See *Quan Tang shi*, 911, 1123, 1324.


16The “tea-horse” trade began during the Tang, and was carried through most of the period from the Northern Song through mid-Qing. See Zhu and Shen, *Zhongguo Chajiu*, 71–72. In *Taxing Heaven’s Storehouse*, Paul J. Smith has done extensive research on the “tea-horse” trade in the Sichuan region during the Song and its socio-economic impact. The trade was a significant part of Wang Anshi’s reform.

18 Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains*, 42. The editor of Anhua xianzhi (1872) traced the county tea industry, pointing out that the local peasants began to plant tea since the fourteenth century, and in the early Qing, the tea industry became increasingly prosperous. In Wu Juenong, ed., *Zhongguo difangzhi chaye lishi ziliao xuanji* [Collection of historical records on tea in Chinese gazetteers] (hereafter ZDCLZX)(Beijing: Nongye chubanshe, 1990), 489.


23 *Quan Tang shi*, 782. In this poem, Yuan Gao did not single out women tea pickers explicitly, but terms such as “whole family” and the description of combing hair implied women’s presence. In tea-picking poems, women’s hair was a focus of delineation.

24 Ibid., 1324.

25 Ibid., 1569.

26 Ibid., 2016. Also see poems by Du Mu and Lu Guimeng. In *Quan Tang shi*, 1324, 1569.

27 Tu Guangting, *Xian zhuan shiyi* [Supplement to biographies of the immortals], in Li Fang, *Taiping Guang ji* [Extensive records from the reign of Taiping Xingguo] (Reprint. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961): 235.

28 An anecdote in *Qing yi lu* [Records of the pure and strange] says that in the springtime, court ladies of the kingdom of Min would gather leaves from two tea plants called “the tree of the pure,” then exhibit the leaves in the palace hall for fun. ZDCLZX, 303. Since Min (the modern day Fujian ) was an important tea-growing area, this palace game might be a reflection of the common involvement of women in tea picking in that locality.

29 See, for example, a poem by Huangfu Zeng, in *Quan Tang shi*: 492. For an English translation of the poem, see Susan Mann and Yu-yin Cheng, eds., *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 233–34.

“Fan Shihu ji” (Collected works of Fan Chengda) (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju Xiang’gang fenju, 1974), 220.


“Jiaqin Yuqian xianzhi” [Gazetteer of Yuqian county, compiled during the Jiaqing reign (1796–1820)]. Guyu is one of the twenty-four solar terms that divide the lunar calendar. It falls normally on 19, 20, or 21 April, and it marks the beginning of the tea harvesting season.

In ZDCLZX, provinces reporting women’s activities in tea harvesting include Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Fujian, Hunan, Guangdong, Sichuan, and Yunnan. See ZDCLZX, 90, 92, 98, 123, 126, 145, 194, 216, 246, 259, 329, 457, 475, 481, 519, 520, 522, 601, 632, 679, 684, 731. This collection of historical material on tea in local gazetteers is by no means comprehensive. Tea picking by women is also reported in other gazetteers that are not included in this volume. For example, Taihu county gazetteers from both the Daoguan and Tongzhi reign report that women took their children to pick tea.


Here we may note an observation raised by scholars on women’s economic roles, which argues that this period saw the “marginalization of women’s economic contributions” in the textile industry, as a result of commercialization (See Bray, Technology and Gender, 237). If commercial development weakened women’s position in the textile industry, then the opposite was true in tea production.


Qu Dajun, Guangdong xinyu [New notes on Guangdong] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 384.


J. L. Buck surveyed the sexual division of labor in rural China in the 1930s. His data show that in the rice-tea area (northern Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, and southern Hunan), women comprised only 5 percent of all the farm labor, as com-
pared to 29 percent in the double-cropping rice area (mainly Guangdong, southern Guangxi, and southern Fujian), 19 percent in the Yangzi rice-wheat area, and 11 percent in the Sichuan rice area. These figures are problematic, as Della Davin points out, “because when percentages of farm work done by women are given, there is no indication of how the figure was obtained—whether, for example, the work is being measured only in terms of time taken on the job or instead an attempt has been made to “discount” lighter work against heavy work.” Delia Davin, “Women in the Countryside of China,” in Women in Chinese Society, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 299, note 11. Davin finds the 5 percent figure particularly “difficult to explain.” She points out that “in this case tea-picking, which absorbed much of the women’s time but was not heavy work, may have been assessed as a small part of the total work done on the land.” Davin, 249. In my view, Buck’s data are also flawed in two respects. First, his classification of areas (rice-tea, double-cropping rice, rice-wheat, and so forth) is too rough to reflect the much more complicated actual situation. Tea was also planted in areas other than those he named “rice-tea” areas. Second, even in what he called the “rice-tea” area, women’s labor distribution can vary greatly between hilly localities and flat land. Therefore, the 5 percent figure holds little explanatory power for our study of female labor in tea picking.


44For example, in mid-Qing Minbei, a famous tea growing area, “pretty producers were most numerous, utilizing only family labor to grow tea and crudely process it. . . .” and only “wealthy peasants operating on a slightly larger scale could afford to use a few hired hands in such operations.” Gardella, Harvesting Mountains, 45–46.

45For early reports about business in the tea-growing areas, see the gazetteer (1746) of Heyuan county, Guangdong, and the gazetteer (1776) of Huoshan county, Anhui. ZDCLZX, 506, 216. When tracing the history of local tea production, an 1872 gazetteer of Anhua county, Hunan, states that from the early Qing on, “merchants from afar have constantly come” to set up tea firms. The 1832 gazetteer of Jiangyang county, Fujian, describes “the tea mountains that stretch to tens and hundreds 里, in which tea plantations are as numerous as woods.” ZDCLZX, 489–490, 320.

46Chûgoku shôbetsu zenshi (repr., Taibei: Nantian shuju youxian gongsi, 1988), 417, 464, 473, 530, 536, 537. The report is based on fieldwork conducted by the Japanese investigators during 1907 through 1918.

47Chûgoku shôbetsu zenshi, 472.

48Ibid., 538.

49Gardella, Harvesting Mountains, 44.

50ZDCLZX, 145.

This idea first appeared in *Chajing* by Lu Yu during the Tang, and became very much emphasized in nearly all the tea connoisseurship literature throughout later periods. See Zhongguo chadian [A Chinese tea encyclopedia] ed. Zhongguo chadian bianweihui (Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1995), 32, 124, 142, 301.

Chinese Repository, vol. VIII (1839–1840), 139.

Wang Fuzhi, *Chuanshan yishu*, 11042.


A number of accounts point out this dangerous situation. See Pu Quan and Qun Ming, eds, *Ming-Qing geyao xuan* [Selection of folksongs from the Ming and Qing] (Shanghai: Shanghai chuban gongsi, 1956), 107; Zhang Tiejun, *Chaxue manhua* [Casual talks on tea] (Taipei, Aertai chubanshe, 1980), 52.


Huang Benji, *Hunan Fangwu zhi* [Accounts of native products from Hunan province], in ZCLZX, 404. Hearsay reported by Robert Fortune describes that when the monkeys were seen up among the rocks where the tea-bushes grew, people would throw stones at them. The angry animals, as hoped, would break off the branches of the tea shrubs, which they threw down at their assailants. Fortune, *A Journey*, 237.

Minzhu xianzhi [Gazetteer of Mingzhu county] (1813), in ZDCLZX, 601.

Two such stories are recorded in local gazetteers. See ZDCLZX, 295, 317.


Zhongguo Chadian, 837.

See, for example, gazetteer records in ZDCLZX, 92, 98, 679.


Luxi xianzhi [Gazetteer of Luxi county] (1871) in ZDCLZX, 475.

Davin, “Women in the Countryside of China,” 248; C. Fred Blake, “Foot-

69Gongxie, see Chinese Repository. (1839) vol. VIII: 198; jinlian, see Jiang Tan, Huatian yuedi yin [A chant of flowering sky and moonlight earth], 1/8a-b; lianbu, see Cao Weijie, “Huangyang jianshan [Mount Huanyangjian],” in ZDCLZX, 123.

70In her autobiography, writer Xie Bingying recalls picking tea with her sister-in-law at the turn of this century. Judging from the fact that her hometown also had a strict custom of foot-binding and that she was from a gentry family, it is extremely likely that her sister-in-law had bound feet. Xie Bingying, Nübin xinzhuan [A new biography of a woman soldier] (Taibei: Lixing shuju, 1976), 10.


72Lou Tsu-K’uang ed. Supplement of Folklore and Folk Literature Series of National Peking University and Chinese Association for Folklore: Chinese Dishes and Drinks (Taibei, 1974).

73Chûgoku shôbetsu zenshi, 416. Similar reports were also circulated in European travelers’ texts. See discussion in Chatterjee, A Time for Tea, 26–27.

74The quote was said to be from the Classic of Tea. However, the quotation is not found in the standard version of the Tang Chajing by Lu Yu such as the Sikuquanshu edition of the text. Neither is it contained in the Ming tea text by the same title by Zhang Qiande.


76See Xie, Nübin xinzhuan, 10.

77Earliest indications of singing tea-songs include Du Mu and Lu Guimeng’s poems from the Tang period, Xiong Fan and Shu Yuexiang’s lyrics from the Song. Xiong’s poem is recorded in his Xuanhe beiyuan gongcha lu [Accounts of tribute tea from the North Garden of the Xuanhe period], cited in ZCLZX, 82.


79Huoshan xianzhi [Gazetteer of Huoshan county] (1776), in ZDCLZX, 216. Also see Fortune, A Journey, 239.


81jianshe baogao, 88.

82According to one study, tea-picking songs circulated in more than twenty provinces; tea-picking dances, or tea-picking lanterns, were most popular in Guangdong, Guangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, Anhui, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian

83 For example, an editor of a Qing gazetteer remarked: “Folk songs are mostly about romantic love.” ZDCLZX, 246. His observation can be verified by several collections of folksongs compiled in this century—some of them might have circulated for centuries—in which tea songs are often love songs. See Zhongshan daxue mingsu congshu [A social custom series of Zhongshan University], vol. 4; Xu Muye. Zhongguo minyao xuanji [Selected ballads of China] (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1971); Zhongguo chadian, 884–901; Kataoka Iwao, Taiwan fengsu zhi [Accounts of social customs of Taiwan] (Taipei: Dali chubanshe, 1981), 265; Also see Ren and Li, “Tusheng tuzhang de cha yishu,” 192.

84 ZDCLZX, 564.

85 In addition to some of poems cited in this work, see other examples in Huang Shangzhi, “Caichanü,” in Chen Menglei, ed., Gujin tushu jicheng (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 47693; Zhang Rexi, “Caicha ge,” in Zhongguo chadian bianweihui. ed., Zhongguo chadian. (Guiyang: Guizhou remmin chubanshe, 1995); and Xiang Wenku, “Caicha ge,” in ZDCLZX, 481. In her recent book, Piya Chatterjee presents a wonderful discussion of the romanticized discourse on tea-pickers in Chinese history (although the Song poem she cites was not “narrated by women”). It is fascinating to note that the Chinese literati portrayal of women tea-pickers bears remarkable resemblance to the later colonial and postcolonial discourse on tea in the West. Chatterjee, A Time for Tea, 26–27, 113.

86 This is a standard metaphor for women’s beautiful skin in classical literature.

87 Jiang Tan, Huatian yuedi yin, 1/ 8a-b.

88 ZCLZX, 454.

89 Cai Hengzi, Mingcong manlu [Casual records of singing insects], in Biji xiaoshuo daguan (Collection of Anecdotal Writings] vol. 11, 354.

90 Zenxiu Liling xianzhi [Revised and enlarged edition of the gazetteer of Liling county] (1870). In ZDCLZX, 444.

91 Anhua xianzhi [Gazetteer of Anhua county] (1872). In ZDCLZX, 489.

92 The scandal involved a tea-firm in Jiangxi that hired women to select tea leaves. It was said the younger and prettier women received higher pay than others did, and this injustice provoked a public fight among women. Sun Jilin, Wan Qing shehui fengsu baiju [A hundred drawings about late Qing social practices] (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1996), 1.

93 Hu Jie, “Xixi zhuzhici [Bamboo branch from Xixi],” in Huang Shitang

94Wang Fuzhi, *Chuanshan yishu*, 11042.

95Li Yiqing, “Chunyuan caichaci,” in *Chinese Repository* (1839), 196–204. Li’s poems were published in Chinese with an English translation. The translation has been revised in this paper.


98ZDCLZX, 123.

99Another poem by a Qing writer, titled “Tianchi caichage [A tea-picking song from Tianchi],” used a similar strategy of using contrast to portray tea-picking women and their families’ hardships. In Hong Huanchun, *Ming-Qing Suzhou nongcun jingji ziliao* [A sourcebook of the rural economy in Suzhou in the Ming-Qing period] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1988), 247–248. Such symbolic images are indeed not only seen in tea-picking poetry. In her analysis of a Qing poem about working women, Susan Mann has pointed out that “the bodily image of women’s work in sericulture was a metaphor for the suffering of overburdened taxpayers and an emblem of class difference.” Mann, *Precious Records*, 167.


101This stream of poetic representation of tea picking women stemmed from a Confucian literary tradition: poetry is a vehicle for transmitting the people’s voice—expressing their joy, sorrow and bitterness—to the ruler of the empire to help him govern wisely.

102See, for example, Xu Guan, “Caichage [A tea-picking poem],” in *Qing shi hui* [A comprehensive collection of Qing poetry] (Reprint. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 2474.

103*Gujin tushu jicheng*, 47550.


105ZDCLZX: 475.

106Zhang, *Nüjie*, 123.


In her another study of the cultural constraints on women’s work, Susan Mann argues that leaving home to work “was a stigma reserved for lowborn women from peripheral areas.” Mann, “Household Handicrafts,” 75. The relatively common involvement of women in the tea industry in the hilly areas confirms her observation that in such areas women were more likely to go out to take job opportunities. It also suggests that cultural ideals were less rigidly applied in these areas.


Susan Mann discussed in her book Precious Records the hierarchy of symbolic value of silk and cotton. Her points out that whereas “silk was the imperial fabric, the clothing of the rich,” cotton was “crude, rough, fit for commoners,” and that “Silk and cotton technologies mimicked this hierarchy of value.” Mann, Precious Records, 159.

Ebrey, The Inner Quarters, 132.