

High value work and the rise of women: the cotton revolution and gender equality in China

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Recap

- ▶ Argues that gender norms (i.e., pro-male preferences in China in 2000) are an outcome of historically low relative wages of women (not having cotton textile production around 1300).
- ▶ Provides historical evidence that cotton textile production in China significantly raised the economic value of women.
- ▶ Collects a large amount of data to document that the presence of cotton textile production in the 14th century in a county is negatively associated with sex ratios at birth (SRB) in 2000, a time when sex selective abortion was common place and SRB was significantly skewed towards boys on average.
- ▶ Also examines other measures of gender norms such as CGSS attitudes and historical suicides (“virtuous” suicides when husbands die).

Identification Difficulties

Omitted variables – e.g., pre-1300 preference for women caused regions to adopt textiles and later to have less sex imbalance

- ▶ Controls for a large number of potential confounders – every historical, economic and geographic control I could think of, province fixed effects, ethnic group fixed effects.
- ▶ Instruments for having textiles with humidity, which is important for tensile strength

My thoughts and feelings

- ▶ Before reading this paper, I thought: oh no – another long-run cross-sectional study about the effect of X a long time ago on Y a long time later?
- ▶ Then I read the paper, and I thought: wow – what a paper!!

What's great about this paper

- ▶ Adds to studies of the economic determinants of long-run cultural norms + understanding gender bias.
- ▶ Detailed historical narrative + well executed and exhaustive empirical analysis to address a fundamentally important question
- ▶ Could be a book – so rich with historical and institutional details
- ▶ Addresses every concern I came up with – left no stone unturned
- ▶ Honest, transparent, no over-selling
- ▶ Creative and labor intensive data construction – all (?) known data from China + newly constructed historical data
 - ▶ very important for studies of China or economic history

Suggestions

- ▶ Clarify conceptual framework – amongst factors that affect SRB in 2000, which ones are outcomes of long-run norms (e.g., relative female wages) vs which ones are potentially confounding variables (e.g., ethnic minority exemption to the One Child Policy).
- ▶ Understand the humidity index better – how does it relate to other weather variables
- ▶ Control for other climate variables
- ▶ Placebo outcomes that could affect female empowerment – e.g., plough, tea
- ▶ SRB understates girls – use alternative measures at later ages

Concluding thoughts

- ▶ This is a wonderful paper – delivers plausible answers to an incredibly ambitious question
- ▶ Congratulations, Melanie!