

# 1960

*In 1960, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued the 'Directive to Immediately End the Hand Spinning and Hand Weaving of Cotton'. This was neither the first nor the last time the government tried to ban rural textile production; indeed, the frequency of these bans indicates they had little effect. The survival of manual textile work speaks to the failure of the socialist state to transform or replace domestic reproduction. Rural women were mobilised for full-time work in the public sector, but also worked a second shift at home, feeding and clothing families, raising children, and comforting husbands. Rural women thus contributed twice to socialist accumulation: as underpaid collective labourers, and as producers of the labour force at home.*

# Production First, Life Second: The 1960 Ban on Hand Spinning and Hand Weaving

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On 7 February 1960, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued the ‘Directive to Immediately End the Hand Spinning and Hand Weaving of Cotton’. This was neither the first nor the last time the government banned manual textile production. Between 1951 and 1965, the central authorities issued seven separate directives that aimed to abolish ‘wasteful’ (浪费) and ‘backward’ (落后) household-based cloth production. The frequency of these bans speaks to their limited effect: millions of rural people continued to wear handloom cloth until the very end of the collective period, and millions of rural women spent a large part of their working hours making cloth and clothes.

Rural handloom weavers were not, in any obvious sense, part of the working class. In fact, the Chinese state saw home-based textile production not as productive work but as a threat to production since it diverted scarce cotton away from state-owned factories. Rural women I interviewed concurred: in their view, hand spinning and hand weaving could not be considered labour (劳动), production (生产), or work (工作, in the sense of a steady job); rather, they were reproductive chores, similar to cleaning, cooking, and childcare. Yet spinning and weaving were undoubtedly important economic activities—as were gathering fuel wood, hauling water, threshing and milling grain, processing and preserving food, raising farm animals, composting excrement to make farmyard manure, and the myriad other tasks rural women performed on a daily basis. Textile work alone could take up half a woman’s working time; a 1954 article in the *People’s Daily* estimated that a woman who was the sole textile provider for a family of four spent six months every year spinning yarn, weaving cloth, and making clothes and bedding.<sup>1</sup>

A history of the Chinese working class—of any working class, in fact—needs to ask how its object is constructed. Not all work is created equal: all societies value some work over other types and exclude some activities from the category that others may include. The Chinese Revolution

redistributed and reevaluated work along three axes: urban–rural, male–female, and productive–reproductive. Urban factory workers stood at the top of the hierarchy: they formed the working class (工人阶级), and they alone had full access to the benefits of industrial citizenship.<sup>2</sup> While the working class comprised women and men, its archetype was the male factory worker. Contract and temporary workers, apprentices, members of handicraft cooperatives, and so on made up the ‘labouring people’ (劳动人民)—a less prestigious category with access only to watered-down benefits. The rural population, too, were labouring people, but their livelihoods were not backed up by the state; instead, their ‘rice bowl’ depended on their own work in the fields and on the vagaries of the weather.

Social reproduction—the work of giving birth to children, nurturing them, and turning them into socially competent adults; of feeding, clothing, and emotionally comforting current and future workers; of caring for the elderly, sick, and dying—was not considered work at all. The socialist state understood work as paid employment in fields or factories; unremunerated work at home was nothing but a private chore. Urban housewives were initially described as ‘parasites’ (寄生虫) whose only path to liberation led through formal employment; it was only in times of economic downturns and male unemployment that the Party praised housewives as useful members of society and encouraged women to stay at home.<sup>3</sup> The 1952 Constitution stipulated that work was an honour and a duty for all able-bodied citizens and, after 1962, almost all urban women worked for wages, albeit in less well-paid and less prestigious sectors than men.

#### Production and Reproduction

The Party never considered rural women housewives. Like men, they were members of agricultural collectives (社员) and were expected to participate in farm work. The Women’s Federation and other branches of the state recognised that domestic labour conflicted with work in the fields, yet even mothers with significant childcare and household duties were expected to perform at least fifteen days of collective work each month and, in the busy seasons, all able-bodied women were expected to work full-time.<sup>4</sup> The Great Leap Forward (1958–62) saw an expansion of collective childcare and other socialised services, but these were mostly seasonal and provided for less than half of rural children even at their peak. After the Great Leap, rural collective childcare was largely abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

Equally importantly, low rural cash incomes and a deficient supply network combined to deprive the countryside of modern consumer goods. Hand spinning and hand weaving survived because rural textile rations were set below replacement needs: the long-term rationing average of 5.5 metres of cloth fell far short of basic textile needs. Similarly, a shortage of coal in the countryside meant rural women spent much time collecting firewood or chopping up grain stalks for fuel; food shortages meant women had to collect wild plants to enrich a monotonous grain diet. Because synthetic fertiliser was in short supply, households composted manure—a laborious task mostly shouldered by women. An absence of modern building materials such as glass, cement, and kiln-fired bricks and roof tiles made it difficult to keep houses dry and clean. Material life in the countryside remained largely unchanged and uncommodified; almost everything people ate, much of what they wore, and most of what they used at home was grown on their own land and produced by the labour of their hands, or that of their neighbours.

What is at issue here is the boundary between production and reproduction. On the one hand, socialism cannot be built on the basis of self-sufficient peasant households that consume most of what they produce. Socialist states generally seek to enlarge the scope of public production and shrink that of domestic reproduction. They do so by providing public childcare and other social services that liberate women from mind-numbing chores and by supplying consumer goods that ease women's domestic burdens. In so doing, they shrink the domain controlled by domestic patriarchy and expand the realm in which socialist values hold sway. Commodity exchange between state industry and households is also one of the ways in which socialist states accumulate capital and finance their social and political ambitions. Soviet leaders from Lenin to Stalin thought of the *smychka* (the alliance between workers and peasants) as rooted in rural–urban exchange and, above all, the exchange of factory cotton cloth for grain.<sup>6</sup>

CCP leaders generally followed the Soviet model of accumulation by means of scissor pricing—that is, by buying agricultural materials at low state-set prices and selling industrial goods back to the countryside at prices that ensured a hefty profit. Yet China differed from the Soviet Union and other socialist states in that it relied heavily on forms of rural self-provisioning that it officially condemned. In theory, socialist China was committed to a circular exchange between state industry and urban population—an exchange that, ideally, would fill state coffers and make

both urban workers and rural peasants better off. Sources from the early 1950s complained about peasants' penchant for 'self-sufficiency' (自给自足思想) and the 'abnormal' (不正常) growth of rural crafts and sidelines that blocked the path towards industrial development.<sup>7</sup> Already in 1949, the new government declared that domestic textile production competed with state industry for raw materials and markets and was to be phased out within the next three years.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, while the state managed to extract more and more raw materials from the countryside, little flowed back. The reason was scarcity. China at the outset of its First Five-Year Plan was a much poorer country than the Soviet Union at a comparable stage of development; its per capita output of grain, coal, and cotton cloth was less than half that of the Soviet Union, while its steel output was less than one-tenth.<sup>9</sup> Faced with conflicting demands on limited resources, the government prioritised urban markets and the crucial export sector. Rural retail outlets were typically the last to be supplied with consumer goods, state capital investment was by and large reserved for urban industry, and inputs for agriculture such as fertiliser and pesticides were expensive and in short supply.

### The Case of Cotton

Let us briefly review this mechanism in the case of cotton, which was second only to grain in its importance for the state's development strategy. The modern mills built in the early 1950s were crucial motors of accumulation, generating high profits for the state. Hand weaving interfered with accumulation since it reduced the amount of cotton available for mechanised processing. Initial attempts to control rural sideline weaving had little effect, but, by 1954, cotton, cotton yarn, and cotton cloth were subject to 'unified purchase and marketing' (统购统销). From then, farmers had to sell their entire cotton harvest to the state, apart from a small amount of 'self-retained cotton' to be used for padding quilts and winter clothes.

At the same time, the state rationed cotton cloth and clothes. Rural rations fluctuated between six and seven metres per capita in the 1950s and 2.3 metres in the crisis years of 1960–62, with a long-term average of 5.5 metres. Actual consumption needs were at least nine metres a year for the average person, taking into account the reduced needs of children. This amount covered a lined and padded winter suit, an unlined summer suit, two pairs of cloth shoes, and some minimal bedding—all of which

were patched and mended until they fell apart. Rations thus fell dramatically short of the most minimal consumption needs: a person with access only to ration cloth would soon have run out of clothes and would have been obliged to stay at home during inclement weather. People coped with scarcity by drawing down existing stocks of clothing—in particular, dowries that young brides had brought to the family when they married. When these stocks were depleted, people stole cotton from the fields and spun it into yarn. Collective leaders, concerned about the wellbeing of their members, routinely hid part of the cotton harvest from the state, and often closed their eyes when pickers pocketed some cottonwool.

Rural self-provisioning was both a problem for the socialist economy and a necessary condition for its functioning. It was a problem because it diverted scarce materials away from state industry. At its peak in 1965, peasant households and underground workshops produced an estimated 566 million metres of cotton cloth—12 percent of China's total cotton textile output in that year.<sup>10</sup> By setting the price for cotton low and that for cloth high, the state all but ensured that people would hang on to their cotton and transform it into cloth at home. Because of shortages, profits for black market weavers were extraordinarily high: a woman who was willing to risk fines and public censure could earn as much as eleven yuan for each kilogram of cotton she spun into yarn and wove into cloth, rising to twenty-four yuan in 1961–62. At seven to ten labour days for each kilogram of cotton, this translates into a daily income of 1.1 to 3.4 yuan—much more than one could hope to earn by working in the fields.<sup>11</sup>

Sources from the 1960s described a freewheeling black market economy, with millions of people in all cotton-growing provinces engaged in commercial weaving, often with the explicit encouragement of local governments. Handloom weavers drew on several sources: farmers stole from the collective fields, collectives embezzled cotton and distributed it to their members, and famine and disaster-stricken brigades petitioned for supplies of below-grade cotton or textile rags, which they unravelled and refashioned into yarn.<sup>12</sup> All this played into the tendency of state and collective units to hoard and misappropriate scarce raw materials and contributed to a dramatic 'cotton famine' in state mills.

At the same time, handloom weaving relieved the state of the obligation to clothe the rural population and freed it to direct scarce textiles to urban consumers and the export trade. If we assume, conservatively, that rural per capita rations fell one metre short of requirements, we arrive at an overall rural shortage of 600 to 700 million metres. Part of the gap was

filled by black market workshops, but the lion's share came from rural women who spun and wove to provide for their families, using whatever cotton they could scrape together. They did so at little cost to the state: their labour was unpaid, and the cotton they used was often mildewed, short-stapled, and unsuitable for machine processing. Had the bans succeeded, the state would have had to provide the missing textiles—or risk a collapse of agriculture because people could not work outdoors without clothing. We can thus think of these 600 to 700 million metres as a subsidy or tribute paid by rural women to the planned economy. Incidentally, this subsidy corresponds to China's textile exports, which ranged from 500 to 700 million metres in the collective years. In short, women's unpaid textile work freed the state to sell fabric and garments abroad, where they earned the foreign currency that paid for technology imports from the Soviet Union and for emergency imports of grain during the 1960 famine.

#### Unrecognised Contributions

Official rhetoric did not acknowledge these contributions. Instead, it urged rural people to produce more and consume less—every pound of grain not eaten and every inch of cloth not used contributed to the construction of socialism.<sup>13</sup> Rural consumption needs were typically discussed under the rubric of 'life' (生活), which was contrasted with production. Official rhetoric left no doubt about priorities: 'Production first, life second' (先生产, 后生活) was a common slogan.

Already in 1949, the new government declared that domestic textile production competed with state industry for raw materials and markets and was to be phased out within the next three years.<sup>14</sup> The introduction in 1954 of the 'unified purchase and marketing' of cotton and cotton cloth should have put an end to household weaving, but it left several loopholes. Farmers who grew cotton on their private plots or on newly opened land were allowed to process it, as long as they sold the cloth to the rural supply and marketing cooperatives at state-set prices. Specialised weavers in traditional weaving districts were supplied with machine yarn and produced cloth under plan, but much of their output found its way on to rural black markets. Areas hit by flood, drought, or other natural disasters were often allowed to engage in 'emergency weaving'—that is, to sustain themselves by selling cloth until conditions had improved enough to resume farming.

These loopholes were gradually closed in the 1960s. A total ban on hand spinning and hand weaving was first proposed in 1956 by the Ministry of Textile Industry; Chairman Mao Zedong reportedly agreed, praising the ministry for generating income for the country and encouraging it to accumulate more.<sup>15</sup> In 1957, the government banned the long-distance trade of handloom cloth and the trade in ration coupons, which were collected by peddlers in rural areas and sold to urban consumers. The Great Leap Forward saw an explosive growth of weaving workshops, as communes and brigades used the Great Leap rhetoric of 'walking on two legs' (两条腿走路) as a pretext to revive handloom weaving. The 1960 ban, written in response to this development, called for an end to all manual textile production without exception. A revised and expanded ban was issued in 1963, followed by more detailed local regulations in 1964. None of these bans had any appreciable effect: handloom weaving began to decline only in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when hardwearing synthetics became widely available in rural areas.